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THE VENETIANS

A Novel

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET," "VIXEN,"
"ISHMAEL," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES
VOL. II.

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THE VENETIANS.



CHAPTER I.

“ONE THREAD IN LIFE WORTH SPINNING.”

VANSITTART'S heart was lighter than it had been for a long time, the day he left Charles Street for Waterloo on his way to Haslemere. He longed to see Eve Marchant, with all a lover's longing, and he told himself that he had tested his own heart severely enough by an absence of three months, and that he had now only to discover whether the lady's heart was in any way responsive to his own. He knew now that his love for Eve Marchant was no passing fancy, no fever of the moment ; and he also told himself that if he could be fairly assured of her worthi-

ness to be his wife, he would lose no time in offering himself as her husband. Of her father's character, whatever it might be, of her present surroundings, however sordid and shabby, he would take no heed. He would ask only if she were pure and true and frank and honest enough for an honest man's wife. Convinced on that point, he would ask no more.

An honest man's wife? Was he who exacted absolute truth in her verily an honest man? Was he going to give her truth in exchange for truth? Was there nothing that he must needs hold back; no secret in his past life that he must keep till his life's end? Yes, there was one secret. He was not going to tell her of his Venetian adventure. It would grieve her woman's heart too much to know that the man she loved had to bear the burden of another man's blood. Nay, more, with a woman's want of logic she might deem that impulse of a moment murder, and might refuse to give herself to a man who bore that stain upon his past.

He meant to keep his secret. He could trust Lisa not to betray him. She and her kinswoman had pledged themselves to silence; and over

and above the obligation of that promise he had bound them both to him by his services, had made their lives in some wise dependent on his own welfare. No, he had no fear of treachery from them. Nor had he any fear of what the chances of time and change might bring upon him from any other belongings of the dead man—so evidently had his been one of those isolated existences which drop out of life unlamented and unremembered. He was safe on all sides, he told himself; and the one lie in his life, the lie which he began when he told his mother that he had not been to Venice, must be maintained steadily, whatever conscience might urge against it.

Easter came late this year, and April, the sunny, the showery, the capricious, was flinging her restless lights and shadows over the meadows and copses as he drove from the station. He had to pass Fernhurst on his way to Redwold Towers, and it was yet early in the afternoon as he drove past the quaint little cottage post-office in the dip of the hill, the tiny graveyard on the higher ground, the church and parsonage. It was early enough for afternoon-

tea, and he had no need to hurry to Redwold. His sister had sent a groom with a dog-cart instead of coming to meet him in her capacious landau, a lack of attention for which he thanked her heartily, since it left him his own master. He would have been less than human if he had not stopped at the Homestead, and being in his present frame of mind very human, he pulled up the eager homeward-going horse at the little wooden gate, and flung the reins to the groom.

“I am going to make a call here; wait five minutes, and if I am not out by that time take the horse to the inn and put him up for an hour.”

“Yes, sir.”

How lightly his feet mounted the steep garden path between the trim box borders. There were plenty of flowers in the garden now — sweet-smelling hyacinths, vivid scarlet tulips with wide open chalices, half full of rain; a snowy mesphilus flinging about its frail white blooms in the soft west wind; a crimson rhododendron making a blaze of colour.

The long, low cottage, with its massive porch, was covered with flowering creepers, yellow

jasmine, pale pink japonica, scented white honey-suckle. The cottage looked like a bower, and seemed to smile at him as he went up the path. He had a childish fancy that he would rather live in that cottage with Eve for his wife than at Merewood, which was one of the prettiest and most convenient houses of moderate size in all Hampshire. What dwelling could ever be so dear as this quaint old cottage, bent under the burden of its disproportionate thatch, with lattice windows peeping out at odd levels, and with dormers like gigantic eyes under overhanging brows.

She was at home, everybody was at home, even that rare bird of undomestic habits, the Colonel. They were all at tea in their one spacious parlour—windows open, and all the perfume of flowers and growing hedgerows and budding trees blowing into the room.

Colonel Marchant welcomed him with marked cordiality. The girls were evidently pleased at his coming.

“How good of you to call on us on your way from the station,” said Sophy. “Lady Hartley told us you were to be met by the afternoon train.”

Lo, a miracle! The five Miss Marchants were all dressed alike—severely, in darkest blue serge. The red Garibaldis, the yellow and brown stripes, the scarlet, the magenta, the Reckitt's blue, which had made their sitting-room a feast of crude colour, had all vanished. Severe in darkest serge, with neat white linen collars, the Miss Marchants stood before him, a family to whose attire the most fastidious critic could take no objection.

Eve was the most silent of the sisters, but she had blushed vividly at his advent, and she was blushing still. She blushed at every word he addressed to her, and seemed to find a painful difficulty in managing the teapot and cups and saucers when she resumed her post at the tea-tray.

Vansittart asked them for the news of the neighbourhood. How had they managed to amuse themselves after the frost, when there was no more skating?

"We were awfully sorry," said Sophy, "but the hunting men were awfully glad."

"And had you any more balls?"

"No public ball—but there were a good many

dances," with half a sigh. "Lady Hartley gave one just before Lent, the only one to which we were invited, and I am happy to say it was out and away the best."

"Lady Hartley has been more than kind to us," said Eve, finding speech at last. "She is the most perfectly charming woman I ever met. You must be very proud of such a sister."

"I am proud to know that you like her," answered Vansittart, in a low voice.

He was sitting at her elbow, helping her by handing the cups and saucers, and very conscious that her hand trembled when it touched his.

"My daughter is right," said the Colonel, with a majestic air; "Lady Hartley is the one lady in this neighbourhood—the one womanly woman. She saw my girls snubbed or ignored, and she has made it her business to convince her neighbours that they are a little too good for such treatment. Other people have been very ready to follow her lead."

"Oh, but it's not for that we care. It is Lady Hartley's friendship we value, not her influence on other people," protested Eve eagerly.

"We are going to Redwold to-morrow after-

noon," said Jenny; "but I don't suppose we shall see you, Mr. Vansittart. You will be shooting, or fishing, or something."

"Shooting there is none, Miss Vansittart. The pheasants are a free and unfettered company in the copses, among the primroses and dog-violets. Man is no longer their enemy. And I never felt the angler's passion since I fished for sticklebacks in the shrubbery at home."

The Colonel chimed in at this point, as if thinking the conversation too childish.

He began to discuss the political situation—the chances of a by-election which was to come on directly after Easter. He expressed himself with the ferocity of an old-fashioned Tory. He would give no quarter to the enemy. He had just returned from Paris, he told Vansittart, and had seen what it was to live under a mobocracy.

"They have been obliged to shut up one of their theatres—cut short the run of the finest play that has been produced in the last decade, simply because their *sans culottes* object to any disparagement of Robespierre. There are a dozen incipient Robespierres in Paris at this

day, I believe, only waiting for opportunity to burst into full bloom."

He had been to Paris, then, thought Vansittart. He could afford to take his pleasure in that holiday capital, while his daughters were kept on short commons at Fernhurst.

"Was Paris very full?" asked Vansittart.

"I don't know about that. I met a good many people I know. One meets more Englishmen than Parisians on the boulevards at this season. April is the Englishman's month. Your neighbour, Mr. Sefton, was at the Continental—in point of fact, he and I went to Paris together."

This explained matters to Vansittart. No doubt Sefton paid the bills for both travellers.

"Mr. Sefton is not a neighbour of mine, but of my sister's," he said. "My father and his father were good friends before I was born, but I know nothing of this gentleman."

"A mutual loss," replied the Colonel. "Sefton is a very fine fellow, as I told you the last time you were here. You can hardly fail to get on with him when you do make his acquaintance."

"I saw him at the hunt ball, and I must confess that I was not favourably impressed by his manner."

“Sefton’s manner is the worst part of him,” conceded Colonel Marchant. “He has been spoilt by Dame Fortune, and is inclined to be arrogant. An only child, brought up in the assurance of future wealth, and taught by a very foolish mother to believe that a landed estate and a fine income constitute a kind of royalty. Sefton might easily be a worse fellow than he is. For my own part, I cannot speak too warmly of him. He has been a capital neighbour, the best neighbour we had, until Lady Hartley was good enough to take a fancy to my girls.”

“I hope you don’t compare Lady Hartley with Mr. Sefton, father,” cried the impulsive Hetty. “There is more kindness in a cup of tea from Lady Hartley than in all the game, and fruit, and trout, and things with which Mr. Sefton loads us.”

“They are enthusiasts, these girls of mine,” said the Colonel, blandly. “Lady Hartley has made them her creatures.”

“Her name reminds me that I must be moving on,” said Vansittart. “I hope you will all forgive this invasion. I was anxious to learn how you all were. It seems a long time since I was in this part of the world.”

"It is a long time," said Eve, almost involuntarily.

Those few words rejoiced his heart. They sounded like a confession that she had missed him and regretted him, since those long friendly walks and talks in the clear cold January afternoons. He had never in all their conversation spoken to her in the words of a lover, but he had shown her that he liked her society, and it might be that she had thought him cold and cowardly when he left her without any token of warmer feeling than this casual friendship of the roads, lanes, and family tea-table. To go away, and stay away for three months, and make no sign! A cruel treatment, if, if, in those few familiar hours, he had touched her girlish heart by the magnetic power of his unacknowledged love.

He left the Homestead happy in the thought that she was not indifferent to the fact of his existence; that he was something more to her than a casual acquaintance.

He was to see her next day; and it would be his own fault if he did not see her the day after that; and the next, and the next; until the solemn question had been asked, and the low-

breathed answer had been given, and she was his own for ever. All was in his own hand now. He had but to satisfy himself upon one point—her acquaintance with Sefton, what it meant, and how far it had gone—and then the rest was peace, the perfect peace of happy and confiding love.

He was unfilial enough to be glad that his mother was not at Redwold. There would be no restraining influence, no maternal arm stretched out to pluck him from his fate. He would be free to fulfil his destiny; and when the fair young bride was won, it would be easy for her to win her own way into that loving, motherly heart. Mrs. Vansittart was not a woman to withhold her affection from her son's wife.

Lady Hartley appeared in the portico as the cart drove up to the door.

“What a fright you have given me!” she said.
“Did anything happen to the train?”

“Nothing but what usually happens to trains.”

“But you are an hour late.”

“I called on Colonel Marchant on my way. It never occurred to me that you could be uneasy on my account, or, of course, I should have come

on straight. I am very sorry, my dear Maud,” he concluded, as he kissed her in the hall.

“You are not cured of your infatuation, Jack.”

“Not cured, or likely to be cured, in your way. I have heard nothing but your praises, Maud. You seem to have been a kind of fairy godmother to those motherless girls.”

“Have I not? How did you like their appearance? Did you see any improvement?”

“A monstrous improvement. They were all neatly dressed, and in one colour.”

“That was all my doing, Jack.”

“Really! But how did you manage it, without wounding their feelings?”

“My tact, Jack, my exquisite tact,” cried Maud, gaily.

They were in her morning-room by this time, and Vansittart sank into a low armchair, prepared to hear all she had to tell. Maud had generally a great deal to say to her brother after an interval of severance.

“I’ll tell you all about it,” she began. “It grieved me to see those poor girls in their coats of many colours, or rather in their assemblage of colours among the five sisters, so I felt I must do

something. I was always looking at them, and thinking how much better I could dress them than they dressed themselves, and quite as economically, mark you. So one day I said casually that I thought sisters—youthful sisters understood—looked to particular advantage when they were all dressed exactly alike, whereupon Eve, who is candour itself—Vansittart's heart thrilled at this praise—"declared herself entirely of my opinion, but she explained that she and her sisters had very little money to dress upon, and they were all great bargain-hunters, and could get most wonderful bargains in stuffs and silks for their frocks at the great drapery sales, if they were not particular in their choice of colours. 'And that is how we always look like a ragged regiment,' said Eve, 'but we certainly get good value for our poor little scraps of money.'"

"A girl who ought to be dressed like a duchess," sighed Vansittart.

"Well, on this I read her one of my lay sermons. I told her that so far from getting good value for her money, she got very bad value for her money; that she and her sisters, in their thirst for stuff at a shilling a yard, reduced from

three and sixpence, made themselves in a manner queens of shreds and patches. She was very ready to admit the force of my reasoning, poor child. And then she pleaded that her sisters were so young—they had no control over their feelings when they found themselves in a great drapery show. It seemed a kind of fairyland, where things were being given away. And then such a scramble, she tells me, women almost fighting with each other for eligible bits of stuff and last season's finery. I told her that I had hardly ever seen the inside of a big shop, and that I hated shopping. ‘What,’ she cried, ‘you who are rich! I thought you would enjoy it above all things.’ I told her no; that Lewis or Redfern sent me one of his people, and I chose my gown from his pattern book, and his fitter came and tried it on, and I had no more trouble about it; or that I went to my dressmaker, and just looked over her newest things in a quiet drawing-room, without any of the distracting bustle of a great shop.”

“My sweetest Maud, what a dear little snob she must have thought you.”

“I don't think she did. She seemed pleased

to know my ways. And then I told her that I should like to see her and her sisters all dressed alike, in one of my favourite colours; and then I told her that I knew of a most meritorious family—invented that moment—who were going to Australia, and whom I wanted to help. ‘In a colony, those bright colours your sisters wear would be most suitable,’ I said. ‘Will you make an exchange with me—just in a friendly way—give me as many of your bright gowns as you can spare, and I will give you a piece of good serge and a piece of the very best cloth in exchange?’”

“Did she stand that?” asked Vansittart.

“Not very well. She looked at me for a moment or two, blushed furiously, and then got up and walked to the window, and stood there with her back towards me. I knew that she was crying. I went over to her and put my arm round her neck and kissed her as if she had been my own kith and kin. I begged her to forgive me if I had offended. ‘I really want to help those poor girls who are going to Melbourne,’ I said; ‘and your bargains would be just the thing for them. They could get nothing half as

good for the same money.' I felt ashamed of myself the next moment. I had lied so well that she believed me."

"Never mind, Maud; the motive was virtuous."

"'No, they couldn't,' she said; 'not till next July. The sales are all over.' And then, after a little more argument, she yielded, and it was agreed that I should drive over to the Homestead next morning, and she and her sisters and I would hold a review of their frocks and furbelows, and whatever was suitable for my Australian emigrants I should take from them, giving them fair value in exchange. Eve stipulated that it should be only fair value. Well, the review was capital fun. The girls were charming—evidently proud of their finery, expatiating upon the miraculous cheapness of this and that, and the genuineness of the sales at the best houses. They had sales on the brain, I think. Of course I left them all the gay frocks suitable for home evenings; but I swooped like a vulture on their outdoor finery. I had taken a large portmanteau over with me, and it was crammed as full as it would hold with frocks and fichus and Zouave jackets for my Australians. I am sorry to say

the portmanteau is still upstairs in the box-room. And now, Jack, you know the history of the serge frocks."

"You are a dear little diplomatist; but I'm afraid you must have made Miss Marchant suffer a good deal before your transmutation was accomplished."

"My dear Jack, that girl is destined for suffering—of that kind; small social stings, the sense of the contrast between her surroundings and those of other girls no better born, only better off."

"She will marry and forget these evil days," said Vansittart.

"Let us hope so; but let us hope that she will not marry you."

"Why should you—or any one—hope that?"

"Because it ain't good enough, Jack; believe me, it ain't. She is a very sweet girl—but her father's character is the very opposite of sweet. Hubert has made inquiries, and has been told, by men on whose good faith he can rely, that the Colonel is a black-leg; that there is hardly any dishonourable act that a man can do, short of felony, which Colonel Marchant has not done. He is well known in London, where he spends

the greater part of his time. He is a hanger-on of rich young men. He shows them life. He wins their money—and like that other hanger-on, the leech, he drops away from them when he is gorged and they are empty. Can you choose the daughter of such a man for your wife?"

"I can, and do choose her, above all other women; and if she is, in herself, as pure and true as I believe her to be, I shall ask her to be my wife. The more disreputable her father, the more it shall be my glory and delight to take her away from him——"

"And when her father is your father-in-law how will you deal with him?"

"Leave that social problem to me. I am not an idiot, or a youth fresh from the University. I shall know how to meet the difficulty."

"You will not have that man at Merewood, Jack," cried Maud, excitedly, "to loaf about my mother's garden—the garden that is hers now—and to play cards in my mother's drawing-room?"

"You are running on very fast, Maud. No; if I marry Eve Marchant be assured I shall not keep open house for her father. He has not been so good a father as to make his claim indisputable."

"Such a marriage will break mother's heart," sighed Maud.

"You know better than that, Maud! You know that only a disreputable marriage would seriously distress my mother, and there can be nothing disreputable in a marriage with a good and pure-minded girl. I promise you that I will not offer myself to Eve Marchant until I feel assured of her perfect truth. There is only one point upon which I have the shadow of a doubt. It seemed to me, from certain trifling indications, that there had been some kind of flirtation between her and Sefton."

"I cannot quite make that out, Jack," answered Maud, thoughtfully. "I have seen them together several times since you left. There is certainly something, on his side. He pursues her in a manner—contrives to place himself near her at every opportunity, and puts on a confidential air when he talks to her. I have watched them closely in her interest, for I really am fond of her in any capacity: except as a sister-in-law. I don't think she encourages him. Indeed I believe she dislikes him; but she is not as standoffish as she might be; and I have seen her

occasionally talking very confidentially with him—as if they had a secret understanding."

"That's it," cried Vansittart, inwardly raging. "There is a secret, and I must be possessed of that secret before I confess my love."

"And how do you propose to pluck out the heart of the mystery?"

"In the simplest manner—by questioning Eve herself. If she is the woman I think her she will answer me truthfully. If she is false and shiftily—why then—I whistle her down the wind, and you will never hear more of this fond dream of mine."

"Well, Jack, you must go your own way. You were always my master, and I can't pretend to master you now. You'll have an opportunity of seeing Eve and Mr. Sefton to-morrow. He is coming to my afternoon. I hope you'll be civil to him."

"As civil as I can. I'll break no bounds, Maud; but I believe the man to be a scoundrel. If he were pursuing Eve with any good motive he would have spoken out before now."

"Precisely my view of the case. It is shameful to compromise her by motiveless attentions.

There goes the gong. I am glad we have had this quiet talk. You will not act precipitately, will you, Jack?" concluded his sister, appealingly, as she moved towards the door.

"I will act as I have said, Maud, not otherwise."

"Well," with a sigh, "I believe she will come through the ordeal, and that I am destined to have her for my sister."

"You have made her love you already. That leaves less work for you in the future."

"Poor mother! She will be wofully disappointed."

"True," said Vansittart; "but as I couldn't marry all her protégées, perhaps it is just as well I should marry none of them; and be assured I should not love Eve Marchant if I didn't believe that she would be a good and loving daughter to my mother."

"Every lover believes as much. It is all nonsense," said Maud, as she ran off to her dressing-room.

Mr. Sefton made an early appearance at Lady Hartley's afternoon. He arrived before the Marchants, and when there were only about a dozen

people in the long drawing-room, and Vansittart guessed by the way he hung about the windows that looked towards the drive that he was on the watch for the coming of the sisters.

Lady Hartley introduced her brother to Mr. Sefton, with the respect due to the owner of one of the finest estates in the county, a man of old family and aristocratic connections. Sefton was particularly cordial, and began to make conversation in the most amiable way, a man not renowned for making himself amiable to his equals. The Miss Marchants were announced while he and Vansittart were talking, and Mr. Sefton's attention began to wander immediately, although he continued the discussion of hopes and fears about that by-election which was disturbing every politician's mind; or which at any rate served as a subject for talk among people who had nothing to say to each other.

Only two out of the three grown-up sisters appeared, Eve and Jenny. They had too much discretion to appear too often as a triplet.

Sefton broke away from the conversation at the first opening, and went straight to Eve, who was talking to little Mr. Tivett, who arrived that

afternoon, no holidays being complete in a country house without such a man as Tivett, with his little thin voice, good nature, and willingness to fetch and carry for the weaker sex.

Vansittart stood aloof for a little while, talking to a comfortable matron, who was evidently attached to the landed interest, as her conversation dwelt upon the weather in its relation to agriculture and the lambing season. He could see that Eve received Mr. Sefton's advances with coldest politeness. On her part there was no touch of that eagerness, that confidential air which had so distressed him that afternoon by the lake. She talked with him for a few minutes, and then turned away, and walked into the adjoining room, where the wide French window stood open to the garden. Vansittart seized his opportunity and followed her. He found her with her sister, looking at a pile of new books on a large table in a corner, and he speedily persuaded them that the flower-beds outside were better worth looking at than magazines and books which were no less ephemeral than the tulips and hyacinths.

He walked up and down the terrace with them for nearly half an hour, but never a hint of

anything more than lightest society talk gave he in all that time. He had made up his mind to speak only after gravest deliberation, only in the calmest hour, when they two should be alone together under God's quiet sky; but he so managed matters that Mr. Sefton had no further opportunity of offering his invidious attentions to Eve Marchant that afternoon. It was Vansittart who found seats for her and her sister in the drawing-room; it was Vansittart who carried their teacups, only assisted by Mr. Tivett, who tripped about with plates of chocolate biscuits, and buttered buns, with such activity as to appear ubiquitous.

The next day was Good Friday, a day of long church services and no visitors. On Saturday Vansittart went to Liss to spend the day with his mother, and to make a tour of inspection of grounds and home farm, a tour which the mother and son took together, and during which they talked of many things, but not of Eve Marchant. If Mrs. Vansittart wondered that her son should have chosen to spend the recess at Redwold rather than at Merewood, she was too discreet to express either wonder or dissatisfaction. She was

going to Charles Street directly after Easter, and Jack was to join her there for the London season; so she had no ground for dolefulness in being deprived of his society for just this one week.

She found him looking well, and, to her fancy, happier than he had looked for a long time. There was an old ring of gaiety in his voice and laugh which she had missed of late years, and which she heard again to-day. They lunched together, and she drove him to the station in the late afternoon.

"It delights me to see you looking so well and so happy, Jack," she said, as they walked up and down the platform.

"Does it, mother?" he asked earnestly. "Is my happiness really enough to gladden you? Are you content that I should be happy in my own way?"

Her answer lingered for a little, and then she said gravely, "Yes, Jack, I am content, for I cannot believe that your way would be a foolish way. You have seen enough of the world to judge between gold and dross, and you are not the kind of man to plunge wilfully into a morass, led by false lights."

“ No, no, mother, you may be sure of that. My star shall be a true star—no Jack o’Lantern.”

The train steamed in opportunely, and cut short the conversation ; but enough had been said, Vansittart thought, to break the ice ; and it was evident to him that his mother had an inkling of the course which events were taking.

The next day was Easter Sunday, a day of gladness, a day when the morning sun is said to dance upon the waters ; a day when the dawn seems more glorious, when the flowers that deck the churches seem fairer than mere earthly flowers, when the swelling chords of the organ and the voices even of the village choir have a sweetness that suggests the heavenly chorus. To John Vansittart, at least, among those who worshipped in the village church that Easter Day, there seemed a gladness in all things—a pure and thrilling gladness as of minds attuned to holiness and ready to believe. He had read much of that new and widening school of thought which is gradually sapping the old foundations and pulling down the old bulwarks ; but there was no remembrance of that modern school in his mind to-day as he stood up in the village

church to join in the Easter hymn. His thoughts had resumed the simplicity of early years. He was able to believe and to pray like a little child.

He prayed to be forgiven for that unpremeditated sin of which the world knew not. He prostrated himself in heart and mind at the feet of the Christ who died for sinners. But he did not go to the Altar. The Easter Communion was not for him whose hands were stained with blood.

The Marchants were at the morning service, all five of them, fresh and blooming after their long walk, a bunch of English roses, redder or paler as Nature had painted each. Eve, tallest, fairest, loveliest, was conspicuous among the sisters.

"By Jove! how handsome that girl is!" whispered little Tivett, as he ducked to put away his hat.

He and Vansittart were sitting apart from the rest, the Redwold pew being full without them.

"I want to walk home with them after church," whispered Vansittart, also intent upon the disposal of the Sunday cylinder. "Will you come too?"

"With pleasure."

This was before the service began, before the priest and choir had come into the chancel.

The service was brief, a service of jubilant hymns and anthem and short flowery sermon, flowery as the chancel and altar, and pulpit and font, in all their glory of arums, azaleas, spireas, and lilies of the valley. The church clock was striking twelve as the major part of the congregation poured out. There was a row of carriages in the road, two of them from Redwold Towers; but Vansittart and Tivett declined the accommodation of landau or waggonette.

“We are going for a long walk,” said Mr. Tivett. “It’s such a perfect day.”

“But you will lose your lunch, if you go too far.”

“We must risk that, and make amends at afternoon-tea.”

“Tivett,” said Vansittart, when the carriages had driven off, “I am going to make a martyr of you. It will be three o’clock at the earliest when we get back to Redwold, and I know you enjoy your luncheon. It’s really too bad.”

“Do you think I regret the sacrifice in the cause of friendship? There go the Marchant

girls, steaming on ahead. We had better overhaul them at once. Don't mind me, Vansittart. I have been doing gooseberry ever since I wore Eton jackets. Only one word—Is it serious?"

"Very serious—sink or swim—heaven or Hades."

"And all in honour?"

"All in honour."

"Then I am with you to the death. You want a long walk and a long talk with Miss Marchant; and you want me to take the whole bunch of sisters off your hands."

"Just so, dear Gussie."

"Consider it done."

They overtook the young ladies in the dip of the road, just where a lane branches off to Bexley Hill. Here they stopped to shake hands all round, and to talk of the church, and the weather—quite the most exquisite Easter Sunday that any of them could remember, or could remember that they remembered, for no doubt memory severely interrogated would have recalled Easter Days as fair.

"Mr. Tivett and I are pining for a long walk," said Vansittart, "so we are going to see you

home—if you will let us—or, if you are not tied for time, will you join us in a ramble on Bexley Hill? It is just the day for the hill—the views will be splendid—and I know that you young ladies are like Atalanta. Distance cannot tire you!”

“We could hardly help being good walkers,” said Sophy, rather discontentedly. “Walking is our only amusement.”

Hettie and Peggy clapped their hands. “Bexley Hill, Bexley Hill,” they cried; “hands up for Bexley Hill.”

There were no hands lifted, but they all turned into the lane.

“We can go a little way just to look at the view,” assented Eve; and the younger girls went skipping off in their short petticoats, and the two elder girls were speedily absorbed in Mr. Tivett’s animated conversation, and Eve and Vansittart were walking alone.

“A little way.” Who could measure distance or count the minutes in such an exhilarating atmosphere as breathed around that wooded hill-side in the balmy April morning? Every step seemed to take them into a purer and finer air,

and to lift their hearts with an increasing gladness. All around them rippled the sea of furze and heather, broken by patches of woodland, and grassy glades that were like bits stolen out of the New Forest, and flung down here upon this swelling hillside. Here and there a squatter's cottage, with low cob wall and steep tiled roof, stood snug and sheltered in its bit of garden, under the shadow of a venerable beech or oak—here and there a little knot of children sprawled and sunned themselves in front of a cottage door. The rest was silence and solitude, save for the voices of those rare birds which inhabit forest and common land.

“Gussie,” whispered Vansittart, when they had passed one of these humble homesteads, and were ascending the crest of the hill, “do you think you could contrive to lose yourself—and the girls—for half an hour?”

“Of course I can. You will have to cooeey for us when you want to see our faces again.”

This little conversation occurred in the rear of the five girls, who had scattered themselves over the hillside, every one believing in her own particular track as the briefest and best ascent.

Eve had climbed highest of all the sisters, by a path so narrow, and so hemmed in by bramble and hawthorn, that only one, and that one a dexterous climber, could mount at a time.

Vansittart followed her desperately, pushing aside the brambles with his stick. He was breathless when he reached the top, where she stood lightly poised, like Mercury. The ascent, since he stopped to speak to Tivett, had taken only ten minutes or so, but when he looked round him and downward over the billowy furze and broken rugged hillside there was not one vestige of Augustus Tivett or the four Miss Marchants in view.

"What can have become of them all?" questioned Eve, gazing wonderingly around. "I thought they were only just behind me—I heard them talking and laughing a few minutes ago. Have they sunk into the earth, or are they hiding behind the bushes?"

"Neither. They are only going round the other side of the hill. They will meet us on the top."

"It's very silly of them," said Eve, obviously distressed. "There is always some folly or

mischief when Hettie is one of our party. Peggy is ever so much more sensible."

"Don't blame poor Hettie till you are assured she is in fault. I shouldn't wonder if it were all Tivett's doing. You must scold good little Tivett. I hope you don't mind being alone with me for a quarter of an hour. I have been longing for the chance of a little serious talk with you. Shall we sit down for a few minutes on this fine old beech trunk? You are out of breath after mounting the hill."

She was out of breath, but the hill was not the cause. Her colour came and went, her heart beat furiously. She was speechless with conflicting emotions—fear, joy, wonder, self-abasement.

They were on the ridge of the hill. In front of them, far away towards the south stretched the Sussex Downs, purple in the distance, save for one pale shimmering streak of light which meant the sea. Below them lay the Sussex Weald, rippling meadows, and the vivid green of spacious fields where the young corn showed emerald bright in the sun—pools and winding streamlets, copses and grey fallows, cottage

roofs and village spires, a world lovely enough for Satan to use as a lure for the tempted.

But for Vansittart that world hardly existed. He had eyes, thoughts, comprehension for nothing but this girl who sat mutely at his side, the graceful throat bending a little, the soft, shy violet eyes looking at the ground.

So far there had been no word of love between them, not one word, not one silent indication, such as the tender pressure of hands, or even the looks that tell love's story. But love was in the air they breathed, love held them and bound them each to each, and each knew the other's unspoken secret.

“Miss Marchant,” began Vansittart with ceremonious gravity, “will you forgive me if I ask you a few questions which may seem somewhat impertinent on my part?”

This was so different from what her trembling heart had expected that she paled as at a sudden danger. He was watching her intently, and was quick to perceive that pallor.

“I don't think you would ask me anything really impertinent,” she faltered.

“Not with an impertinent motive, be assured.

Well, I must even risk offending you. I want you to tell me frankly what you think of Mr. Sefton."

At this the pale cheeks flushed, and she looked angry.

"I don't like him, though he is my father's friend, and though he is always very kind—obtrusively kind. He has even offered Sophy and me his horses to ride—to have the exclusive use of two of his best hacks, if father would let us ride them; but of course that was out of the question. We could not have accepted such a favour from any one."

"Not from any one but an affianced lover," said Vansittart. "Do you know, Miss Marchant, when I first saw you and Mr. Sefton together at the ball I thought you must be engaged."

"How very foolish of you."

"He had such an air of taking possession of you, as if he had a superior claim to your attentions."

"Oh, that is only Mr. Sefton's masterful way. He cannot forget the extent of his acres or the length of his pedigree."

"But he seems—always—on such confidential terms with you."

“I have known him a long time.”

“Yes, but his manner—to a looker-on—implies something more than friendship. Oh, Miss Marchant, forgive me if I presume to question you. My motive is no light one. Last January by the lake I saw you and that man meet, with a look on both sides of a preconcerted meeting. I heard, accidentally, some few words which Mr. Sefton spoke to you, while you were walking with him by the lake; and those words implied a secret understanding between you and him—something of deep interest of which the outer world knew nothing. Be frank with me, for pity’s sake. Speak openly to me to-day, from heart to heart, if you never speak to me again. Is not there something more between you and Wilfred Sefton than an everyday friendship?”

“Yes,” she answered, “there is something more. There *is* a secret understanding—not much of a secret, but Mr. Sefton has taken advantage of it to offer me meaningless attentions which I detest, and which, I dare say, ill-natured people may talk about. They would be sure to think that Mr. Sefton could have no serious intentions about me, that he was only carrying on an idle flirtation.”

“And if he were serious—if he asked you to be his wife?”

“To live in that grand house; to rule over all those acres; to have a wafer-space on that long pedigree! Could Colonel Marchant’s daughter refuse such a chance?”

“Would Colonel Marchant’s daughter accept it?”

“Not this daughter,” answered Eve, gaily. “I might hand him on to Sophy, perhaps. Poor Sophy hankers after the pomps and vanities of this wicked world.”

Her gaiety delighted her lover. It told of an unburdened conscience—a heart at peace with itself.

“Tell me what it was you overheard, Mr. Eavesdropper, that afternoon by the lake?” she asked.

“I heard him say to you, very earnestly, ‘It was a false scent, you see;’ and then he expressed his sorrow for your disappointment.”

“You have a good memory. I, too, remember those words, ‘It was a false scent.’ It was. He had need to be sorry for my disappointment, for he had cheated me with false hopes.”

"About what? About whom?"

"About my brother."

"Your brother? I did not know you had a brother."

"We don't talk about him in a general way. He has been a wanderer over the earth for many years. He was never with us at Fernhurst. He and my father had a terrible quarrel before we left Yorkshire—chiefly about his college debts, I believe. There seemed to be dreadful difficulties at Cambridge. My father used all his influence to get him out of the country, and succeeded in getting him a berth in the Cape Mounted Police. Parting with him perhaps went nearer to break my mother's heart than our loss of home and fortune."

"It must have been a hard parting."

"It was indeed hard. He went away in disgrace. My father would not speak to him or look at him. He lived at the Vicarage during those last weeks before the ship sailed away with him to Africa. The Vicar and his wife were very good to him, but everybody felt that he was under a cloud. I fear—I fear that he had done something very wrong at Cambridge—something

for which he might have been arrested—for he seemed to be in hiding at the Vicarage. And he left one night, and was driven over to Hull, where he went on board a boat bound for Hamburg, and he was to sail from Hamburg for the Cape. My mother and I went to say good-bye to him that last evening, after dark; the others were too young to be told anything; they hardly remember him. He kissed us, and cried over us, and promised mother that for her sake he would try to do well—that he would bear the hardest life in order to redeem his character. He promised that he would write to her by every mail. The dog-cart was at the door while he was saying this. The Vicar came into the room to hurry him away. I have never seen him since that night.”

CHAPTER II.

“ONE BORN TO LOVE YOU, SWEET.”

“AND Mr. Sefton,” asked Vansittart, “what has he to do with this?”

“He was with my brother at Cambridge—in the same year, at the same college, Trinity. It was not till the year before last that he ever spoke to me about Harold, or that I knew they had been friends. But one summer afternoon when he called and happened to find me in the garden, alone—a thing that seldom happens in our family—he began to talk to me, very kindly, with a great deal of good feeling, about Harold. He said he had been slow to speak about him, as he knew that he must be in some measure under a cloud. And then I told him how unhappy I was about my poor brother; and how it was four or five years since anything had been heard of him directly or indirectly. His last letter had

told us that he was going to join a party of young men who were just setting out upon an exploring tour in the Mashona country. They were willing to take him with them on very easy terms, as he was a fine shot, and strong and active. He would be little better than a servant in the expedition, he told me."

"It was to you he wrote, then?"

"Yes, after my mother's death, only to me. He never wrote to his father. I told Mr. Sefton how unhappy I was about Harold, and my fear—a growing fear—that he must be dead. He argued me out of this terror, and told me that when a man who was leading a wild life far away from home once became neglectful of his home obligations and let a long time slip without writing, the probabilities were that he would leave off writing altogether. His experience had shown him that this was almost a certainty. And then, seeing how distressed I was, he promised that he would try and find out Harold's whereabouts. He told me that the newspaper press and the electric cable had made the world a very small world, and that he certainly ought to be able to trace my brother's wanderings, and bring me some information about him."

"And did he succeed?"

"No; he failed always in getting any certain knowledge of Harold's wanderings, though he did bring me some scraps of information about his adventures in Mashonaland; but that was all news of past weeks—ever so long ago. He could hear nothing about Harold in the present—not within the last four years—so there was very little comfort in his discoveries. Last November he told me that he had heard of a man at the diamond fields whose description seemed exactly to fit my brother, and he thought this time he was on the right track. He wrote to an agent at Cape Town, and took every means of putting himself in communication with this man—both through the agent and by advertisements in the local papers—and the result was disappointment. There was no Harold Marchant among the diamond-seekers. That was what he had to tell me the afternoon you overheard our conversation. He had received the final letter which assured him he had been mistaken."

"And that was all—and verily all?" inquired Vansittart, taking her hand in his.

"That was all, and verily all."

“And beyond that association, Mr. Sefton is nothing in the world to you?”

“Nothing in the world.”

“And if there were some one else, quite as willing as Mr. Sefton, to hunt for this wandering brother of yours, some one else who loves you fondly”—his arm was round her now, and he was drawing her towards him, drawing the lovely blushing cheek against his own, drawing the slender form so near that he could hear the beating of her heart—“some one else who longs to have you for his wife, would you listen to him, Eve? And if that some one else were I, would you say ‘Yes’?”

She turned to answer him, but her lips trembled and were mute. There was no need of speech between lovers whose very life breathed love. His lips met hers, and took his answer there.

“Dearest, dearest, dearest,” he sighed, when that long kiss had sealed the bond; and then they sat in silence, hand clasped in hand, in the face of the Sussex Weald, and the far-reaching Sussex Downs, and the silvery shimmer of the distant sea.

Oh, Easter Day of deep content! Would either of these two souls ever know such perfect bliss again—the bliss of loving and being loved, while love was still a new thing?

A shrill long cooey broke the silent spell, and they both started up as if awakened out of deepest slumber.

"They are looking for us," cried Eve, as she walked swiftly towards the other side of the ridge.

Tivett and the four girls came toiling towards her.

"Mr. Tivett has taken us a most awful round," cried Hetty. "He pretended to know the way, and he doesn't know it one little bit."

"My dear young lady," apologized the gentle Tivett, "the truth of the matter is that I trusted to my natural genius for topography, for I have never been on Bexley Hill before."

"And you pretended to pilot us, and have only led us astray."

"Alas! sweet child, the world is full of such pilots."

"Shall I tell them?" whispered Vansittart, at Eve's ear.

"If you like. They will make a dreadful fuss.

Can you ever put up with so many sisters-in-law?"

"I would put up with them if you had as many sisters as Hypermnestra ;" and then, laughing happily, he told these four girls that they were soon to have a sister less and a brother more.

Hetty and Peggy received the news with whooping and clapping of hands, Sophy and Jenny with polite surprise. Was there ever anything so wonderful? Nothing could have been further from their thoughts. Little Mr. Tivett skipped and frisked like a young lamb in a meadow. Had Eve Marchant been his sister he could hardly have shown more delight.

The descent of the hill for Eve and Vansittart was a progress through pure ether. They knew not that their feet touched the earth. They were like the greater gods and goddesses in the Homeric Olympus. They started and they arrived. The labour of common mortals was not for them.

"Do you remember the legend of the blue flower of happiness which grows upon the mountain peak, and is said to fade and wither in the lower air?" asked Vansittart, close at his fiancée's ear. "We have found the blue flower

on the hilltop, Eve. God grant that for us the heaven-born blossom will keep its bloom even on the dull level of daily life.”

“Will our life be dull?” she questioned, in her shy sweet voice, as if she scarcely dared speak of her love louder than in a whisper. “I don’t think I can ever find life dull so long as you really care for me.”

“No, Eve, life shall not be dull. It shall be as bright and varied, and as full of change and gladness, as devoted love can make it. Your youth has not been free from care, dearest; and you have missed many of the pleasures which girls of your age demand as a right. But the arrears shall be made up. There shall be full measure of gladness in your married life, if I can make you glad. I am not what the modern world calls a rich man; but I am very far from being a poor man. I have enough for all the real pleasures of life—for travel, and books, and music, and the drama, and gracious surroundings, and kindly charities. The sting of poverty can never touch my wife.”

“It can be a very sharp sting sometimes,” said Eve; and then, dropping again into that

shy undertone, "But if you were ever so poor, and if you were a working man, and we had to live in that cottage under the beech tree, squatters, with only a key-holding, I think I could be perfectly happy."

"Ah, that is what love always thinks, while the blue flower blooms; but when that mystic flower begins to fade there is some virtue in pleasant surroundings. Years hence, when you begin to be tired of me, and the blue flower takes a greyish shade, why, we can change the scene of our lives, wander far away, and in a new world I shall seem almost a new lover."

"Will you ever take me to Italy?" she asked. "Italy has been the dream of my life, but I never thought it would be realized."

"Ah, that is just a girl's fancy, fed by old-fashioned poets—Byron, for instance. The Italy of to-day is very disappointing, and just like everywhere else."

"Oh, Mr. Vansittart!"

"Mr.!" he echoed. "Henceforward I am John, or Jack; very soon, my husband. Never again Mr., except in your letters to tradespeople or your orders to servants."

"Am I really to call you Jack?"

"Really. It is the name by which I best know myself. But if you think it is too vulgar——"

"Vulgar; it is a lovely name. Jack! Jack!"

She repeated the monosyllable as if it were a sound of infinite music, a sound on which to dwell lingeringly and lovingly for its very sweetness. To Vansittart also the sound was sweet, spoken by those lips.

Colonel Marchant received Mr. Vansittart's offer for his eldest daughter politely, but with no excess of cordiality. He had set his hope upon a richer marriage, had encouraged Sefton's visits to the Homestead, with the idea that he would eventually propose to Eve. He might not mean matrimony in the first instance, perhaps, though he obviously admired the young lady, but he would be led on and caught before he was aware. Colonel Marchant had implicit faith in his daughter's power to ward off any evil purpose of her admirer; and although he knew Sefton's character well enough to know that he would not willingly marry a penniless girl, he trusted to the power of Eve's beauty and

personal charm to bring him to the right frame of mind.

He was too shrewd a campaigner, however, to refuse the humble sparrow in the hand for the goldfinch in the bush. Sefton had been dangling about the family for nearly two years, and had scrupulously abstained from any serious declaration ; and here was a young man of good birth and breeding, with a very fair estate, who between January and April had made up his mind in the manliest fashion, and was willing to take Eve for his wife without a sixpence, and to settle three hundred a year upon her by way of pin money. Vansittart had offered himself in a frank and business-like manner, had declared the amount of his income, and his anxiety to marry as soon as possible.

“ We have nothing in this world to wait for,” he said.

“ Except a young lady’s caprice,” answered the Colonel. “ Eve will be too happy in the pleasures of courtship to be anxious for the final step. And then there will be her trousseau to prepare. That will take time.”

“ My mother can help her in all those details,”

said Vansittart, thinking that in all probability his mother would have to pay for as well as to choose the wedding finery. "We can take all that trouble off your hands, Colonel Marchant."

His mother! He had yet to tell her that his fate was decided—his life companion chosen. There had been some hint of what was coming in their brief talk at the railway station.

He wrote to his mother on Sunday night, when his sister's household and guests were hushed in their first sleep; wrote at fullest length, dwelling fondly upon the graces and perfections of her whom he had chosen; assuring and re-assuring his mother that the choice was a wise one.

"She will love you dearly, if you will let her," he wrote; "she will be to you as a second daughter—nearer to you, perhaps, than Maud can now be; for, if you will have it so, our lives may be spent mostly together, in a triple bond of love. I know not what your inclination may be, but for my own part I see no reason why we should not live together as one family. Merewood is large enough for a much larger family than ours could be for years to come. Eve has been so long motherless that she would the more gladly

welcome motherly love and solicitude. Think of it all, mother, and act in all things as may be most congenial to yourself. I would ask no sacrifices, but I do ask you to love my wife."

This letter written, he could lay himself down to rest with an unburdened spirit, could freely surrender himself to dreamland, knowing that his love would be with him in the land of shadows.

Strange, cruel, that the scene of his dreams should be Venice, where he and Eve were wandering confusedly, now on land, now on sea, greatly troubled by petty disturbances, and continually losing each other in labyrinthine streets and on slimy sea-washed stairs. Stranger still that Venice should be unlike Venice, and indeed unlike any place he had ever seen in his life.

The dream was but a natural sequence of Eve's talk about Italy. It had hurt him that one of her first utterances after their betrothal should express her desire to visit a land whose frontier he would never willingly cross again. He had loved Italy with all his heart; but now the image of Venice burnt and festered in his mind like a plague spot on the breast of a man in full health. All except that one accursed memory was peace.

CHAPTER III.

“THE TIME OF LOVERS IS BRIEF.”

WHEN a man is sole master of his estate and thoroughly independent of his kindred, his choice of a wife, if not altogether outrageous and unpardonable, must needs be submissively accepted by his belongings. Vansittart lost not an hour in telling his sister and her husband that henceforth they must look upon Eve Marchant as a very close connection.

“We shall be married at midsummer,” he said, “so you may as well begin to think of her as a sister-in-law.”

Sir Hubert, who was the very essence of good nature, received the announcement with unalloyed cordiality.

“She is a bright, frank girl, very pretty, very winning, and very intelligent,” he said. “I con-

gratulate you, Jack—though naturally one would have wished——”

“That she were the daughter of a duke, or that she had half a million of money,” interjected Vansittart. “I understand you. It is a bad match from a worldly point of view. I, who have between three and four thousand a year, should have stood out for other three or four thousand with a wife, and thus solidified my income. I ought at least to have tried America; seen if the heiress market there would have supplied the proper article. Well, you see, Hubert, I am of too impatient a temper for that kind of thing. I have found the woman I can love with all my heart and mind, and I have lost no time in winning her.”

“You are a paladin, Jack—a troubadour—all that there is of the most romantic and chivalrous,” laughed Sir Hubert.

“She is a dear, dear girl,” sighed Maud, “and I could hardly be fonder of her if she were my sister—but it certainly is the most disappointing choice you could have made.”

“Is it? Why, I might have chosen a barmaid.”

"Not you. You are not that kind of man. But except a barmaid—or"—with the tips of her lips—"a chorus girl, you could scarcely have done worse than this. Now, don't rage and fume, Jack. I tell you I think the girl herself adorable—but four sisters and an impossible father! *Quelle corvée!*"

"It is a *corvée* that need never trouble you," cried Vansittart, indignantly.

"You are extremely ungrateful. Haven't I been forming her for you?"

"She needed no forming. She has never been less than a lady—pure and simple and straightforward—never affecting to be rich when she was poor—or to be smarter than her surroundings warranted."

"Yes, yes, she is perfect, that is understood. She is the betrothed of yesterday, a stage of being which touches the seraphic. But what will you do with her father, and what will you do with her sisters?"

"Her sisters are very good girls, and I hope to treat them in a not unbrotherly fashion. As for her father—there, though the obligation is small, I grant the difficulty may be great. However, I

shall know how to cope with it. No miner ever thought to get gold without some intermixture of quartz. The Colonel shall be to me as the gold-digger's quartz. I shall get rid of him as speedily as I can."

Through all that Easter week Vansittart lived in the blissful dream which beginneth every man's betrothal. At such a time as this the dumpiest damsel of the pug-nosed milkmaid type is as fair as she who brought slaughter and burning upon Troy; but for Vansittart's abject condition there was the extenuating circumstance of undeniable beauty, and a charm of manner which even village gossip had never disputed. The young ladies who condemned the Miss Marchants en bloc as "bad style" had been fain to confess that Eve had winning ways, which made one almost forgive her cheap boots and mended gloves.

Vansittart was happy. He had promised to join his mother in Charles Street on the Wednesday after Easter; but he wrote to her apologetically on Tuesday, deferring his arrival till the beginning of the following week — and the

beginning of a week is a term so lax that it is sometimes made to mean Wednesday.

He was utterly happy. His mother's letter received on Tuesday morning was grave and kindly, and in no way damped his ardour.

"You have been so good a son to me, my dear Jack, that I should be hard and ungrateful if I murmured at your choice, although that choice has serious drawbacks in surrounding circumstances. You are too honest and frank and true yourself not to be able to distinguish the difference between realities and semblances. I do not doubt, therefore, that your pretty Eve is all you think her. She certainly is a graceful and gracious creature, with a refined and delicate prettiness of the wild rose type, which I prefer greatly to the azalea or the camelia order of beauty. She cannot fail to love you—nor can she fail to be deeply grateful to you for having rescued her from shabby surroundings and a neglectful father. God grant that this step which you have taken—the most solemn act in a man's life—may bring you the happiness which the marriage of true minds must always bring."

There was much more, the outpouring of a

mother's love, which ran away with the mother's pen, and covered three sheets of paper; but even this long letter did not suffice without a postscript.

"P.S.—Miss Marchant spoke to me—incidentally—of a brother, and from her evident embarrassment I fear that the brother is as undesirable a connection as the father. It would be well that you should know all that is to be known about him before he is your brother-in-law; so as to avoid unpleasant surprises in the future."

Happily the idea of this brother's existence was already familiar. In their very first ramble together as engaged lovers Eve had told Vansittart a great deal about her brother. She dwelt with the younger sister's fond admiration upon his youthful gifts, which seemed to be chiefly of the athletic order; his riding, his shooting, his rowing, his running: in all which exercises he appeared to have excelled. At Cambridge his chief sins, as Eve knew them, had been tandem driving, riding in steeplechases, with frequent absences at Newmarket. Whatever darker sins had distinguished his college career were but dimly suspected by Eve.

"My father was very proud of him while he was quite a boy," Eve told her lover, "but when he grew up, and began to spend money, they were always quarrelling. Poor mother! It was so sad to see her between them—loving them both, and trying to be loyal to both; her poor heart torn asunder in the struggle."

"And he was fond of you, this brother of yours?" questioned Vansittart, to whom such fondness seemed a redeeming virtue.

"Yes, he was very fond of me; he was always good to me. When there was unhappiness in the dining-room and drawing-room—when Harold was what father called sulky—he used to come to the school-room, and sit over the fire roasting chestnuts all the evening. He would go without his dinner rather than sit down with father, and would have some supper brought to the school-room at ten o'clock, and my good old governess and I used to share his supper and wait upon him. What merry suppers they were! I was too thoughtless to consider that his being with us meant bad blood between him and father, and unhappiness for my poor mother. She used to look in at the school-room door sometimes, and

shake her head, and call us naughty children ; but I know it was a relief to her to see him eating and drinking and laughing and talking with dear little Mütterchen and me. But I am tiring you with these childish reminiscences."

"No, love ; there is no detail in your past life so trifling that I would not care to know it. I want to feel as if I had known you from your cradle. We will go to see the old place near Beverley some day, if you like, and you shall show me the gardens where you played, the rooms in which you lived. One can always get into another man's house by a little management."

That Easter week was a time of loveliest spring weather. Even the sun and the winds were gracious to these happy lovers, and for them April put on the guise of May. Vansittart spent almost all his days at the Homestead, or rambling with the sisters, Eve and he walking side by side, engrossed in each other's company, as if the world held no one else—the sisters ahead of them or in the rear, as caprice dictated.

Every lane and thicket and hillside between

Fernhurst and Blackdown was explored in those happy wanderings; every pathway in Verdley Copse was trodden by those light footsteps; and Henley Hill and its old Roman village grew as familiar to Vansittart as Pall Mall and the clubs. They revelled in the primroses which carpeted all those woodland ways; they found the earliest bluebells, and a hollow which was white as snow with the fairy cups of the wood anemone.

One morning, as they were walking over the soft brown carpet of fir needles and withered oak leaves in Verdley Copse, Vansittart opened a little dark-blue velvet box, and showed Eve a ring—a half-hoop of sapphires set with brilliants.

"I chose the colour in memory of the blue flower of happiness that you and I found on the hilltop," he said, as he put the ring on the third finger of his sweetheart's slender hand. "If ever you are inclined to be angry with me, or to care for me a little less than you do now, let the memory of the mystical blue flower plead for me, Eve, and the thought of how dearly we loved each other that Easter Sunday years and years ago."

She gave a faint, shuddering sigh at the image those words evoked.

“Years and years ago! Will this day when we are young and happy ever be years and years ago? It seems so strange!”

“Age is strange and death is stranger; but they must come, Eve. All we have to hope for and to pray for is that we may go on loving each other to the end.”

After those ramblings in the coppices and over the hill, there was afternoon tea at the Homestead—a feast for the gods. Colonel Marchant, well content with the progress of affairs, had gone to Brighton for the volunteer review, and was not expected home again till the end of the week; so the sisters were sovereign rulers of the house, and afternoon tea was the order of the day. It is doubtful whether dinner had any part in the scheme of their existence at this time. The short-petticoated youngsters generally carried some hunks of currant cake in a basket, and these hunks were occasionally shared with the elder sisters, and even with Vansittart, who went without his luncheon day after day, scarcely knowing that he had missed a meal. Then they all tramped home in their muddy boots—for however blue the sky and however dry the roads

there was always plenty of mud in the copses—and then they all sat round the big loo table to what Hettie called a stodgy tea. Stodgy being interpreted meant a meal of cake and toast, and eggs, and bread and jam, and a succession of teapots. Vansittart only left the Homestead in time to drive back to Redwold to dress for dinner.

On the Thursday evening the Miss Marchants who were “out” were all bidden to dinner at Redwold, and were to be driven thither by that very fly which had broken down on the crest of the snowy hill. It was a grand occasion, for an invitation to dinner rarely found its way to the Homestead. Cards for garden-parties were the highest form of courtesy to which the Miss Marchants had hitherto been accustomed. And this dinner was to be a solemn affair, for Eve was to appear at it in all the importance of her position as Vansittart’s future wife. Mrs. Vansittart was coming from London for a night or two in order to be present at the festivity, which would be in a manner Eve’s formal acceptance as a member of the family.

It was only on Thursday morning that Van-

sittart discovered with some vexation that Mr. Sefton had been asked to this family dinner. Sir Hubert had met him, and had invited him in a casual way, having not the faintest idea that his society would be displeasing either to Eve or her lover. The first person Eve's eyes lighted on when she and her sisters entered the drawing-room was Mr. Sefton. He was standing near the door, and she had to pass him on her way to her hostess. He stood waiting until Lady Hartley turned to greet the sisters, and then at once took possession of Eve.

"I have to congratulate you. As an old friend I venture to congratulate you most warmly," he said, holding her hand, after the inevitable shake-hands of old acquaintances. "You have done wonderfully well for yourself. It is really a brilliant match."

"For me, you mean," she said, looking at him with an angry light in her eyes. "Why don't you finish your sentence, Mr. Sefton, and say, 'for you, Miss Marchant, with your disadvantages'?"

"I am sorry I have offended you."

"I don't like to be told I have done well for

myself. God has given me the love of a good man. If he were not Mr. Vansittart, but Mr. Smith with only a hundred a year, I should be just as happy."

Vansittart, that moment approaching, overheard the familiar British patronymic. "What are you saying about Mr. Smith?" he asked, remembering how two men, one the slain and the other the slayer, had hidden their identity under that name.

"I was only talking of an imaginary Smith," she answered, her face lighting up as she turned to her lover. "There is no such person."

"Come and look at the azaleas," said Vansittart; "they are worth a visit;" and so, after the lover's fashion, he who had only parted from her at six o'clock took her away to the conservatory at the other end of the room, and absorbed her into a solitude of azaleas and orange trees.

Mr. Sefton in the mean while was talking to Mrs. Vansittart, and not having done over well with his congratulation of the future bride now occupied himself in congratulating the elder lady upon the advantage of having secured so charming a daughter-in-law.

"I quite agree with you," replied Mrs. Van-

sittart. "She is very pretty, and altogether charming. The match is not of my making, but I am pleased to see my son happy, and pleased to welcome so fair a daughter. You talk as if you were an old friend of the family. Have you known Colonel Marchant long?"

"Ever since he came to this neighbourhood, nine years ago. He has been good enough to accept any little shooting I have had to offer—and he and I have seen a good deal of each other. I knew his son before I knew him. Harold Marchant and I were at Trinity together."

"Harold Marchant is dead, I conclude?"

"That is more than I or any of his friends can tell you. He is one of that numerous family—the lost tribe of society—the men who have dropped through."

"I don't quite follow you."

"My dear Mrs. Vansittart, the less said about Harold Marchant the better. If he is dead the good old saying comes in—*de mortuis*. If he is alive I think the less you, or your son, or your daughter-in-law have to do with him the happier it will be for you."

"Mr. Sefton, it is not fair to talk to me in this

vague strain. I am personally interested in Eve's brother. What do you mean?"

"Only what I might mean about a good many young men who have lived within the walls that sheltered Bacon and Newton, Whewell and Macaulay. Harold Marchant's career at Cambridge was a foolish career. Instead of devoting himself to the higher mathematics he gave himself up to hunting, horse-racing, and other amusements of even a more dangerous order. He had to leave the University hurriedly—he had to leave the country still more hastily. He has never within my knowledge come back to England. Eve is, or was, passionately attached to him, and to gratify her I have taken a good deal of trouble in trying to find out his present whereabouts and mode of life; but without avail. It is nearly ten years since he left this country. He was then two and twenty years of age. He was last heard of more than five years ago with an exploring party in Mashonaland. He is exactly the kind of young man one would like to hear of in Central Africa, and intending to stay there!"

"Poor Eve; how sad for her!"

“But that is all over now. She has a new love, and will soon forget her brother.”

“I do not think she is so shallow as that.”

“Not shallow, but intense.”

Dinner was announced at this moment, and Sir Hubert came to offer Mrs. Vansittart his arm. He was to have his mother-in-law on his right hand and Eve on his left, and Mr. Sefton was to sit by his hostess on the other side of the table. This ended the conversation about Harold Marchant, and it was not renewed after dinner.

CHAPTER IV.

AS A SPIRIT FROM DREAM TO DREAM.

LADY HARTLEY, once being reconciled to the inevitable, was full of kindness for her brother's future wife. Eve had seen nothing of London and its gaieties, and as the Hartleys had taken a house in Bruton Street for the season, it seemed only a natural thing to take her up to town with them, and initiate her into some of the pleasures to which her future position would entitle her.

"And when you are married I can present you," she told Eve. "It isn't worth while going through that ordeal till next year. You will have plenty to do between now and midsummer in getting your trousseau ready."

Eve blushed, and was silent for a few minutes, and then, as she was alone with Lady Hartley in

the morning room at Redwold, she took courage, and said—

“I’m afraid my trousseau will be a very small one. I asked my father last night what he could do for me, and he said fifty pounds would be the utmost he could give me. It wouldn’t be overmuch if I were going to marry a curate, would it?”

“My dearest Eve, fifty pounds will go a long way, as I shall manage things. Remember I am going to be your sister, a real sister, not a sham one, and while we are buying the trousseau your purse and mine shall be one.”

“Oh, I couldn’t allow that. I couldn’t let myself sponge upon you. I would rather be married in white alpaca.”

“My child, you shall not be married in alpaca. And as for sponging upon me, well, if you are so mightily proud you can pay me back every shilling I spend for you, a year or so hence, out of your pin-money.”

“My pin-money,” repeated Eve. “Father told me how generously Mr. Vansittart had offered to settle an income upon me—upon me who bring him nothing, not even a respectable trousseau.”

"Now, Eve, I won't hear a word more about the trousseau, until we are going about shopping together."

"You are too kind, yet I can't help feeling it hard to begin by taxing your generosity. Isn't it the custom for the bride to bring the house linen in her trousseau?"

"Oh, in bourgeois families no doubt, and with young people just setting up in the world; but Merewold is very well provided with linen. You can't suppose mother and Jack have lived there without tablecloths or dusters. There is nothing for you to think about, Eve, but your own pretty frocks, and we will think about them together. I adore chiffons, and shopping, and all the frivolities of life."

Ten days later Eve was in London, a petted guest in one of the prettiest houses in Bruton Street. Lady Hartley had the knack of beautifying any house she lived in, even a furnished house, a tent that was to be shifted in less than three months. Huge boxes of flowers were sent up from Redwold every other day to decorate those London rooms, and not content with this

floral decoration, Maud Hartley was always buying things—china, lamps, baskets, elegant frivolities of all kinds, to make the hired house homelike.

She would apologize to her husband in an airy way for each fresh extravagance. “That pretty china plaque caught my eye at Howell and James’s while Eve and I were looking at their silks,” she would say.

Sir Hubert complained laughingly that if the Kohinoor were for sale at a London jeweller’s it would inevitably catch Maud’s eye.

“And her eye once caught she is hypnotized,” said Sir Hubert. “She must buy.”

Charles Street and Bruton Street are very near. Vansittart could run over, as his sister called it, at any and every hour of the day; and the result of this vicinity was that he lived more in his sister’s house than in his mother’s. But Mrs. Vansittart was kind, and seemed really pleased with her future daughter-in-law; so when Jack was not in Bruton Street Eve was in Charles Street, at luncheon sometimes, but oftener at afternoon tea, and at cosy little dinners, in the arrangement of which Mrs. Vansittart excelled. She knew a great many people in London,

military, clerical, legal, literary, and artistic, and she knew how to blend her society and bring people together who really liked to meet each other.

This world of London in the season was a new world to Eve Marchant; these homes in which the pinch of poverty, the burden of debt, had never been felt, had a new atmosphere. Her spirits, gay even in the midst of household care, rose in these happier circles, and she charmed all who met her by her spontaneous graces of mind and manner, her quickness to perceive, her ready appreciation of wit and sense in others.

For Vansittart that month of May in the great city was a period of consummate happiness. The freshness of Eve's feelings gave a new flavour to the commonest things. The parks and gardens, the picture-galleries, the concerts and theatres were all new to her. Only on the rarest occasions had she been gratified by an evening in London and the sight of a famous actor. Her father had always excused himself from taking his daughters to any public amusements on the plea of poverty.

All the Marchant girls had known of London

began and ended in the drapers' shops and the after-season sales. To travel to town by an early train, third class, to tramp about all day in mud or dust, as the case might be, and to eat a hurried luncheon at some homely pastry-cook's, was the utmost they had known of metropolitan pleasures; and even days so unluxurious had been holidays to them. To see the shop windows, to have the spending of a little money, ever so little, meant happiness. It was only when they had emptied their purses that the shadow of care descended upon them, and they began to doubt whether they had invested their pittance wisely.

Now Eve moved about like a queen among people who never had to think about money. She was taken to see everything that was worth seeing; to hear everything that was worth hearing. She saw all the picture-galleries, and learnt to discriminate between all the schools of modern art. She heard Sarasate, and Hollmann, and Menter, and all the great instrumentalists of her epoch. She never heard of cabs or omnibuses, or fares, or money given for tickets. She was carried hither and thither in a luxurious barouche or a snug brougham, and her place at concert

and play was always ready for her—one of the best places in the hall or the theatre. The dress-makers, and bootmakers, and milliners to whom Lady Hartley took her never talked of money; indeed they seemed almost to shudder at any allusion to that vulgar drudge 'twixt man and man. The people at the tailor's were as interested in the gowns and coats they were to make for her as if they had been works of art for which fame would be the sole recompense. The Frenchwoman who was to make her wedding-gown pooh-pooed the question of cost. Expensive, this frisé velvet for the train—yes, that might be, but she would rather make Mademoiselle a present of the fabric than that, with her tall and graceful figure, she should wear anything commonplace or insignificant. Art for art's sake was ostensibly the motto for all Bond Street.

And Eve had so much to think of that she could not think very seriously about her trousseau. She let Lady Hartley order what she pleased. She, Eve, had her lover to think about; and that was an absorbing theme. She knew his footstep on the pavement below the open window; she knew the sound of the bell when he rang it. If

the weather were wet, and he came from Charles Street in a hansom, she knew his way of throwing back the cab doors before the wheels stopped. When he was absent, all her life was made up of thinking about him and listening for his coming. In that morning hour in the drawing-room before he arrived she might have sat to Sir Frederick Leighton for "Waiting" or "Expectancy."

It was scarcely strange that while John Vansittart was so absorbed in the new delight of his life, John Smith was just a little neglectful of his protégées in Saltero's Mansion, Chelsea. John Smith had, indeed, no consciousness of being neglectful. If the image of Lisa flashed across his mind in any moment of his full and happy day it came and went together with the comfortable thought that he had done his duty to that young woman. She had her aunt, her bright and pretty home, her singing master, and all the delightful hopes and ambitions of an artist who has discovered that she has fortune within her reach. Had he thought of Lisa all day long, he could never have pictured her otherwise than happy and contented.

He was at Covent Garden one evening with his sister and his betrothed, and he saw the Venetian amidst her troops of companions. The opera was *William Tell*, and Lisa was in short petticoats and Swiss bodice, with gold chains about her neck and arms, and gold daggers in her hair. She looked very pretty, amidst that heterogeneous crew of young, middle-aged, and elderly. He was in the stalls, and at a considerable distance from the stage, and those dark eyes did not find him out and fasten upon him as they had done that other night when he was in Lady Davenant's box. The sight of her reminded him that it was nearly a month since he had called upon the aunt and niece, and that she ought to have made some progress with her musical training in the interval, progress enough, at any rate, to make the childish creature anxious to report herself to him.

Eve was to be engaged at her dressmaker's on the following afternoon, in a solemn ordeal described as "trying on;" and Vansittart had been warned by his sister that he must not expect to be favoured with her society until the evening, when they were all to dine in Charles Street. It

seemed to him that he could hardly employ this afternoon better than in visiting Fiordelisa and her aunt, who would be wounded perhaps in their warm southern hearts if he should seem to have lost all interest in their welfare.

The day was delightful—one of those brilliant afternoons in May which give to West End London the air of an earthly paradise ; a paradise of smart shops and smart people, thorough-bred horses and newly built carriages, liveries spick and span from the tailor's ; flowers everywhere—in the carriages, in the shops, on the kerbstone—flowers and fine clothes and spring sunshine. Vansittart walked to Chelsea, glad of an excuse for a walk after the habitual carriage or hansom. He had promised to look at some pictures in Tite Street upon this very afternoon—pictures of that advanced Belgian school whose work he would scarcely care to show to Miss Marchant without a previous inspection—so he availed himself of the opportunity, and called at the painter's house on his way to Saltero's Mansion.

He found a room full of people, looking at pictures set round on easels draped with terracotta silk, criticizing freely and talking pro-

digiously. He found himself in the midst of an artistic tea-party. There was a copper kettle singing over a spirit-lamp on a table crowded with Spanish irises, and there was the painter's young English wife, in an orange-coloured Liberty gown, pouring out tea, and smiling at the praises of her husband.

The painter was no phlegmatic Fleming, but a dark-eyed, fiery son of French Flanders. He came from the red country between Namur and Liege, and had been reared and educated in the latter city.

He was standing by the largest of his pictures—a scene from “*Manon Lescaut*”—and listening to the criticisms of a little knot of people, all apparently ecstatic, and among these élite of the art-loving world Vansittart was surprised to see Mr. Sefton.

Sefton turned at the sound of Vansittart's voice. They had met a good many times since Easter, and in a good many houses, for it was one of Sefton's attributes to be seen everywhere; but Vansittart had not expected to find him at a comparatively unknown painter's tea-party.

“Delightful picture, ain't it?” he asked care-

lessly. "Full of truth and feeling. How is Miss Marchant to-day? I thought she looked a little pale and fagged at Lady Heavyside's last night, as if her first season were taking it out of her."

"I don't think my sister would let her do too much." They had drifted towards the tea-table, and the crowd had stranded them in a corner, where they could talk at their ease. "I did not know you were by way of being an art critic."

"I am by way of being everything. I give myself up to sport—body and bones—all the winter. I let my poor little scraps of intellect and taste hibernate from the first of September till I have been at the killing of a May fox; and then I turn my back upon rusticity, put on my frock-coat and cylinder hat, and see as much as I can of the world of art and letters. To that end I have chosen this street for my summer habitation."

"You live here—in Tite Street?"

"Is that so surprising? Tite Street is not a despicable locality. We consider ourselves rather smart."

“I should have looked for you nearer the clubs.”

“I am by no means devoted to the clubs. I like my own nest and my own newspapers. Is not this little bit full of colour and feeling?”

He turned to admire a cabinet picture on a draped easel—“Esmeralda and the Captain of the Guard,” one of those pictures which Vansittart would have preferred Eve Marchant not to see, but over which æsthetic maids and matrons were expatiating rapturously.

Vansittart did not stop to take tea, meaning to gratify Lisa by allowing her to entertain him with the mild infusion she called by that name. He spoke to the two or three people he knew, praised the pictures in very good French to the artist, who knew no English, and slipped out of the sultry room, with its odour of violets and tea-cake, into the fresh air blowing up the river from the woods and pastures of Bucks and Berks.

He had not walked above half a dozen yards upon the Embankment when he heard the sound of hurrying footsteps behind him, and an ungloved hand was thrust through his arm, and a

joyous voice exclaimed breathlessly, "At last! You were going to see me? I thought you had forgotten us altogether."

"That was very wrong of you, Signora," he answered, gently disengaging himself from the olive-complexioned hand, plump and tapering, albeit somewhat broad, such a hand as Titian painted by the score, perhaps, before he began to paint Cardinal Princes and great ladies.

He did not want to walk along the Chelsea Embankment, in the broad glare of day, with the Venetian hanging affectionately upon him. That kind of thing might pass on the Lido, or in the Royal Garden by the canal, but here the local colour was wanting.

"It is ages since you have been near us," protested Fiordelisa, poutingly. "I am sure you must have forgotten us."

"Not I, Signora. Englishmen don't forget their friends so easily. I have been in the country till—till quite lately. And you—tell me how you have been getting on with your singing master."

"He shall tell you," cried Fiordelisa, flashing one of her brightest looks upon him. "He

pretends to be monstrously pleased with me. He declares that in a few months, perhaps even sooner, he will get me an engagement at one of the small theatres, to sing in a comic opera. They will give me ever so much more money than I am earning at Coveny Gardeny."

The Venetian often put a superfluous vowel at the end of a word, not yet having mastered those sternly English terminations of hard consonants. "The maestro is to have some of the money for his trouble, but that is fair, is it not?"

"Fair that he should take a small percentage, perhaps, but not more."

"A percentage? What is that?"

Vansittart explained.

"But to sing in your English comic opera I must speak English ever so much better than I do now," pursued Lisa, "and for that I am working, oh, so hard. I learn grammar. I read story books; 'Bootle's Baby;' the 'Vicar of Wakefield.' Oh, how I have laughed and cried over that Vicar and his troubles—and Olivia—Olivia who was so ill-used—and so happy at last."

"Happy, with a scoundrel," exclaimed Vansittart.

"Ah, but she loved him. One does not mind how much scoundrel if one loves a man."

"A bad principle, Signorina. It is better to love a good man ever so little than a scoundrel ever so much."

"No, no, no. It is the loving much that means happiness," argued Lisa, and then she expatiated upon her English studies. "La Zia and I go to the theatre when there is no performance at Coveny Gardeny. We sit in the pit, where the people are kind, and make room for us because we are foreigners. Signor Zinco says there is no better way of learning English than in listening to the actors in good plays. Oh, how I listen! In three months from this day people will take me for an Englishwoman," she said finally.

"Never, Lisa, never," he said, laughingly contemplative of the sparkling olive face, the great dark eyes with golden lights in them, the careless arrangement of the coarse black hair, the supple figure in its plain black gown, and the essentially foreign and southern air which years of residence in England would hardly obliterate. "Never, Si'ora! Your every glance is eloquent

of Venice and her sister isles. It seems almost a crime to keep you captive in this sunless city of ours."

"Oh, but I adore London," she exclaimed, "and your London is not sunless. See how the sun is shining on the river this afternoon; not as it shines on the lagunes in May, I grant you, but it is a very pretty piccolo sole."

"And la Zia," asked Vansittart; "she is well, I hope?"

"She is more than well. She is getting fat. Oh, so fat. She is as happy as the day is long. She loves your London, the King's Road most of all. At night there are barrows, fish, vegetables, everything. She can do her marketing by lamp-light, and the streets are almost as full and as gay as the Merceria. La Zia was never so happy in all her life as she is in London. She never had so much to eat."

They were near Saltero's Mansion by this time.

"You will come in and let me make you some tea, won't you?" pleaded Lisa.

"Not this afternoon, Si'ora. I wanted to see you, to know that all was going well with you. Having done that, I must go back to the West End to—to keep an appointment."

He was thinking that possibly Eve's "trying on" would be finished in time for him to snatch half an hour's tête-à-tête in one of the Bruton Street drawing-rooms, before she dressed for dinner. There were three drawing-rooms, in a diminishing perspective, dwindling almost to a point, the third and inner room too small to serve any purpose but flirtation, and here the lovers could usually find seclusion.

Lisa pouted and looked unhappy.

"You might stay and take tea with me," she said; "la Zia will be home soon."

"La Zia is out, then?"

"Yes; she has taken Paolo to Battersea Park for the afternoon. The rehearsal for the new opera keeps me all day long, and la Zia takes the boy for his daily walk; but it is past five, and they will be home as soon as I am, I dare say."

"I will come this way again in a week or so, Si'ora."

"You are very unkind," protested Lisa, in her impulsive way; and then, with one of those sudden changes which so well became her childish uncultured beauty, she exclaimed, "No, no;

forgive me ; you are always kind—kind, kindest of men. Promise you will come again soon.”

“I promise,” he said, stopping short and offering his hand.

“Then I’ll walk back just a little piece of way with you—only as far as the big house with the swans.”

Lisa’s company on Cheyne Walk was an honour which Vansittart would have gladly escaped. She was too pretty and too peculiar looking not to attract notice ; and there was the tea-party in Tite Street, with its little crowd of worldlings, any of whom would be curious as to his companion, should he by chance be seen in this society. He did not want to be rude, for the lace-girl from Burano was a creature of strong feelings, and was easily wounded.

“I am in a desperate hurry, Si’ora.”

“You were not in a hurry when I overtook you just now. You were walking slowly. You cannot walk faster than I. At Burano I never used to walk. I always ran.”

“Poverina ! How quickly you must have used up your island.”

“Yes ; it was like a prison. I used to watch

the painted sails of the fishing-boats, and long for them to carry me away to any place different from that island, where I knew every face and every stone, every window and every chimney. That is why I love your London, in spite of fogs and grey skies. It is so big, so big."

She stopped, with clasped hands and flashing eyes. A street boy wheeled round to look at her, and gave a low whistle of admiring surprise; and at the same instant Sefton turned a street corner, came across the road, and passed close to Vansittart and his companion.

Of all men living, this man was the last whom Vansittart would have cared to meet under such conditions.

CHAPTER V.

“LOVE SHOULD BE ABSOLUTE LOVE.”

SEFTON lifted his hat and passed quickly. Vansittart stood mutely watching his retreating figure, till it was lost among other figures moving to and fro along the Embankment. An empty hansom came creeping slowly by the curb while he stood watching.

“Here is a cab which will just do for me, Signorina,” he said. “Good-bye. I’ll see you on one of your maestro’s days, so that I may hear his opinion of your chances.”

“He comes on Tuesdays and Saturdays, from three to four. Who is that gentleman who bowed to you? A friend?”

“No; only an acquaintance. Good-bye.”

“How vexed you look! Are you ashamed of being seen with me?”

“No, child, no; only that man happens to be one of my particular aversions. A rivederci. Stay! I will take you to your door. The cab can follow.”

It had occurred to him in a moment that Sefton was capable of turning and pursuing Lisa if he left her unprotected. He was just the kind of man, Vansittart thought, who, out of sheer devilry, would try to discover the name and antecedents of this lovely stranger. He had a deep-rooted distrust of Wilfred Sefton, which led him to anticipate evil.

He walked with Lisa to Saltero's Mansion, and saw her vanish under the lofty doorway, with its Queen Anne portico, and then he turned and walked slowly back as far as Tite Street, with the cab following him. So far there was no sign of Sefton, who might, therefore, be supposed to have continued his way Londonwards; but the rencontre had been a shock to Vansittart's nerves, and had set him thinking seriously upon the danger of his relations with Fiordelisa and her aunt, and more especially of the peril which must always attach to the use of an alias.

Was it well, or wise, or safe that he, Eve Mar-

chant's promised husband, should be the guardian angel of this wild, impulsive peasant girl—a guardian angel under the borrowed name of Smith, liable at any hour to be confronted with people who knew his real name and surroundings? He considered his position very seriously during the drive to Bruton Street, and he resolved to do all in his power to narrow his relations with the Venetians, while fulfilling every promise and every obligation to the uttermost.

Colonel Marchant was at the family dinner in Charles Street. It had been agreed between Mrs. Vansittart and her son that he should be invited to this one gathering, so that he should not have any ground for considering himself left out in the cold, albeit his future son-in-law's intention was to hold as little communion with him as possible. Eve's neglected girlhood had not fostered filial affection. The father's name had been a name of fear in the Marchant household, and the sisters had been happiest when their only parent was amusing himself in London, careless of whether the angry baker had stopped the daily supply, or the long-suffering butcher had refused to deliver

another joint. Such a man had but little claim upon a daughter's love, and Eve had confessed to Vansittart that her father was not beloved by his children, and that it would not grieve her if in her future life she and that father met but rarely.

"You are going to be so generous to me," she said, "that I shall be able to help my sisters—in ever so many ways—with their clothes, and with their housekeeping; for I can never spend a third part of the income you are settling upon me."

"My frugal Eve! Why, there are women with half your charms who would not be able to dress themselves upon such a pittance."

"I have no patience with such women. They should be condemned to three gowns a year of their own making, as my sisters and I have been ever since we were old enough to handle needles and scissors. I am horrified at the extravagance I have seen at the dressmaker's—the reckless way some of your sister's friends spend money."

"And my sister herself, no doubt. She has a rich husband, and I dare say is one of the worst offenders in this line?"

"Not she! Lady Hartley dresses exquisitely, but she is not extravagant like the others. She is too generous to other people to be lavish upon herself. She is always thinking of doing a kindness to somebody."

"Poor little Maud! I remember when she was in the school-room all her pocket-money used to be spent upon dolls for the hospital children. She used to come and beg of me when she was insolvent."

Vansittart met Wilfred Sefton at an evening party within a few days of that rencontre at Chelsea; and at the same party Vansittart was disturbed by seeing Sefton and his mother in close confabulation in one of those remote and luxurious corners where people are not obliged to listen to the music that is being performed in the principal room.

He questioned his mother about Sefton at breakfast next morning. "You and he seemed uncommonly thick," he said. "What were you talking about?"

"About you, and your approaching marriage."

"I am sure you said nothing that was not

kind, but I wish to Heaven you would not discuss my affairs with a stranger," said Vansittart, with some warmth.

"Mr. Sefton is not a stranger. Your father and his father were very good friends. He is your sister's most influential neighbour, and they are on the friendliest terms. Why should you call him a stranger?"

"Because I don't like him, mother; and because I wish never to feel myself on any other footing with him."

"And yet he likes you."

"Does he? I am a very bad judge of humanity if my dislike of Sefton is not heartily reciprocated by Sefton's dislike of me. And no doubt the more he dislikes me the more he will assure other people—my kindred especially—that he likes me. You are too straight yourself, mother, in every thought and purpose, to understand the Seftonian mind. It is the kind of intellect which always works crookedly, which cannot go straight. He admired Eve Marchant, allowed his admiration to be patent to everybody, and yet was not man enough to try to win her for his wife."

"He had not your courage, Jack, in facing unpleasant surroundings and disagreeable antecedents."

"He had not manhood enough to marry for love. That is what you mean, mother. He was quite willing to compromise an innocent and pure-minded girl, by attentions which he would not have dared to offer to a girl with a watchful father or mother."

"My dear Jack, you exaggerate Mr. Sefton's attentions. He assured me that his chief interest in Eve arose from his old companionship with her brother, with whom he was on very intimate terms until the unhappy young man turned out an irretrievable scamp."

Vansittart winced at the phrase. It is not an agreeable thing for a man to be told that his future brother-in-law, the brother whom his future wife adores, is irretrievable.

"Mr. Sefton has taken a great deal of trouble to trace Harold Marchant's career since he was last heard of," continued Mrs. Vansittart, "and would hold out a friendly hand to him if there were anything to be done."

"He has no need to hold out a friendly hand.

If there is anything to be done for my brother-in-law I can do it."

"How ready you are to take new burdens."

"I think nothing a burden which comes to me with the woman I love."

Mrs. Vansittart sighed, and was silent. The idea of these disreputable connections which her son was to take to himself in marrying Eve was full of pain for the country-bred lady, whose people on every side were of good birth and unblemished respectability. Never had there been any doubtful characters in her father's family, or among that branch of the Vansittarts to which her husband belonged. She had been born in just that upper middle class which feels disgrace most keenly. There is no section of society so self-conscious as your county gentry, so fixed in the idea that the eyes of Europe are upon them. The duke or the millionaire can live down anything—sons convicted of felony, daughters divorced—but the country gentleman who has lived all his life in one place, and knows every face within a radius of twenty miles from the family seat, to him, or still more to his wife or widow, the slightest smirch upon a relative's character means agony.

Mrs. Vansittart liked and admired Eve Marchant; but she did not let her heart go out to her as it ought to have gone to the girl who was so soon to be to her as a daughter. Colonel Marchant's existence was a rock of offence which even maternal love could not surmount. She had talked to her family lawyer, an old and trusted friend, and from him she had heard all that was to be said for and against Eve's father. He was not quite so black, perhaps, as his neighbours in the country had painted him; but his career had been altogether disreputable, and his present associations were among the most disreputable men, calling themselves gentlemen, about town. He was a familiar figure in the card-room at clubs where play was high, and was looked upon with unmitigated terror by the parents and guardians of young men of fortune or expectations. A youth who affected Colonel Marchant's society was known to be in a bad way.

And now the question was not only of Colonel Marchant, but of his son, who was even a darker character than the father, and whose darkness might at any time communicate itself to his sister's name. It was easy enough to say

that the sister was blameless, that it was no fault of hers that her father was a scamp, and her brother a swindler and a forger. Society does not easily forgive sisters or daughters for such relationships, and now that the pseudo-scientific craze of heredity has taken hold of the English mind, society is less inclined even than of yore to ignore the black sheep in the fold. Every one who heard of Eve Marchant's antecedents would anticipate evil for her husband. The bad strain would show itself somehow before many years were gone. The duskiness in the parental wool would crop up in the fleece of the lamb.

It was hard, very hard, for the mother who doated on her only son, to feel ashamed of his wife's relations and up-bringing; and Mrs. Vansittart feared that to the end of her life she must needs feel this shame. Already her neighbours at Merewood had tortured her by their keen interest in her son's betrothed, their eagerness to know every detail, their searching questions about her people, all veiled under that affectionate friendliness which justifies the most tormenting curiosity.

Mrs. Vansittart was a good woman and a

devoted mother, but she had the temperament which easily yields to worrying ideas, to dark apprehensions of possible evils, and her love of her son had just that alloy of jealousy which is apt to cause trouble. While John Vansittart was going about with his betrothed from one scene of amusement to another, utterly happy in her company, enchanted to show her places and people which were as new to her as if they had been in fairyland, his mother was brooding over her fears and fostering her forebodings, and affording Mr. Sefton every opportunity of improving his acquaintance with her. It was a shock to Vansittart to find that Sefton had established himself on the most familiar footing in Charles Street, a privileged afternoon dropper-in, who might call six days out of the seven if he chose, since Mrs. Vansittart had no allotted day for receiving, but was always at home to her friends between four and five during the summer season, when the pleasantest hour for driving was after five.

Sefton was clever, lived entirely in society and for society, during the brief London season, frequented the studios of artists and the tea

parties of litterateurs, knew, or pretended to know, everything that was going to happen in the world of art and letters, and would have been welcome on his own merits in the circles of the frivolous. He contrived to amuse Mrs. Vansittart, and to impress her with an exaggerated idea of his talent and versatility.

“He can talk well upon every subject,” she told her son.

“My dear mother, you mean that he is an adept in the season’s jargon, and can talk of those subjects which came into fashion last month; like the new cut of our coat collars, and the new colour of our neckties. A man of that kind always impresses people with his cleverness in May and the first half of June. Talk with him later, and you’ll find him flat, stale, and unprofitable. By July he will have emptied his bag.”

It was scarcely a surprise to Vansittart, knowing his mother’s liking for Mr. Sefton, to find that gentleman seated in her drawing-room one Saturday evening when he returned rather late from a polo match at Hurlingham. It was to be Eve’s last Saturday in London. June was at

hand, and she was to go back to Fernhurst on the first of the month, to spend the small remnant of her single life with her sisters. She was to be married on St. John's Day.

They had lingered at the tea-table on the lawn, sighing sentimentally over the idea that this was positively the last Saturday; that not again for nearly a year could they sit together drinking tea out of the homely little brown teapot, and watching the careless crowd come and go in the sunshine and the summery air.

In Charles Street, the cups and saucers had not been cleared away, although it was past seven. A side window in the front drawing-room looked westward, up the old-fashioned street, towards the Park, and the low sunlight was pouring in through the Madras-muslin curtain, shining on the jardinière of golden lilies and over the glittering toys on the silver table.

Vansittart opened the drawing-room door, but changed his mind about going in when he saw Sefton established on the sofa, half hidden in a sea of pillows.

“I'm very late,” he said. “How do you do, Sefton?” with a curt nod. “I'm to dine in

Bruton Street, mother. Good night, if I don't see you again."

"Pray come in, Jack. I have something very serious to tell you—or at least Mr. Sefton has. He has been waiting for you ever since five o'clock. I wanted him to tell you at once. It is too serious for delay."

"If I hadn't left Miss Marchant and my sister five minutes ago I should think, by your solemnity, that one of them had been killed," exclaimed Vansittart, scornfully, crossing the room with leisurely step, and seating himself with his back to the yellow brightness of that western window. "And now, my dear mother, may I inquire the nature of the mountain which you and Mr. Sefton have conjured out of some innocent mole-hill? Please don't be very slow and solemn, as I have only half an hour to dress and get to Bruton Street. Boïto's *Mephistopheles* will begin at half-past eight."

"This is no trivial matter, Jack. Perhaps when you have heard what Mr. Sefton has to tell you may hardly care about the opera—or about seeing Miss Marchant, before you have had time for serious thought."

"There is nothing that Mr. Sefton—or the four Evangelists—could tell me that would alter my feelings about Miss Marchant by one jot or one tittle," cried Vansittart, furiously, his angry feeling about this man leaping out of him like a sudden flame.

"Wait," said the mother, gravely—"wait till you have heard."

"Begin, Mr. Sefton. My mother's preamble is eminently calculated to give importance to your communication."

"I am hardly surprised that you should take the matter somewhat angrily, Vansittart," said Sefton, in his smooth, persuasive voice. "I dare say I shall appear an officious beast in this business—and, had it not been for Mrs. Vansittart's express desire, I should not be here to tell you the facts which have come to my knowledge within the last two days. I considered it my duty to tell your mother, because in our previous conversations she has been good enough to allude to old ties of friendship between your father and my father—and this made a claim upon me."

"Proem the second," cried Vansittart, impatiently. "When are we coming to facts?"

“The facts are so uncommonly disagreeable that I may be pardoned for approaching them diffidently. You know, I believe, that Miss Marchant has a brother——”

“Who disappeared some years ago, and about whose fate you have busied yourself,” interrupted Vansittart, with ever-growing impatience.

“All my efforts to trace Harold Marchant’s movements after his departure from Mashonaland resulted in utter failure, until the day before yesterday, when one of the two men whom I employed to make inquiries turned up at my house in Tite Street as suddenly as if he had dropped from the moon. This man is a courier and jack-of-all-trades, as clever and handy a dog as ever lived, a man who has travelled in all the quarters of the globe, a Venetian. When I began the search for Miss Marchant’s brother, I put the business in the first place into the hands of a highly respectable private detective; but as a second string to my bow it occurred to me to send a full statement of the circumstances, and a careful description of the missing man, to my old acquaintance, Ferrari, the courier, guide, philosopher, and friend, who travelled with my

poor father on the sea-board of Italy for several months, and who helped to nurse him on his sick-bed."

Vansittart bridled his tongue, but could not keep himself from drumming with his fingers on the dainty silver table and setting all the toy harpsichords, and sofas, and bird-cages, and watering-pots, and bonbonnières rattling.

"I had half forgotten that I had employed this man in Harold Marchant's business when the fellow turned up in Tite Street, bronzed and bearded, irrepressibly cheerful, with the most unpleasant information."

"What information? For God's sake, come to the point!"

"He had traced Marchant's career — from Mashonaland to the diamond fields, where he picked up a goodish bit of money; from the diamond fields to New York, from New York to Venice. For God's sake, leave those bibelots alone," as the silver toys leapt and rattled on the fragile table. "Do you think no one has nerves except yourself?"

"Your man traced Marchant to Venice," said Vansittart, the restless hand suddenly motionless; "and what of him at Venice?"

“At Venice Marchant lived with a girl whom he had taken out of a factory. Pardon me, Mrs. Vansittart, for repeating these unpleasant facts—lived, gambled, drank, and enjoyed life after his own inclination, which always leaned to low company even when he was an undergraduate. From Venice he vanished suddenly, more than three years ago.”

Vansittart fancied they must needs hear that heavily beating heart of his thumping against his ribs. He fancied that, even in that dimly lighted room, they must needs see the ashen hue of his face, the beads of sweat upon his forehead. All he could do was to hold his tongue, and wait for that which was to come.

“Do you happen to remember a murder, or, I will rather say, a scuffle ending in homicide, which occurred at Venice three years ago in Carnival time—an English tourist stabbed to death by another Englishman, who got away so quickly and so cleverly that he was never brought to book for what he had done? The row was about a woman, and the woman was Harold Marchant’s mistress. Marchant was jealous of the stranger’s attentions to the lady—he had

lived long enough in Italy to have learnt the use of the knife—and after a free fight of a few moments he stabbed his man to the heart. Ferrari heard the whole story from a Venetian, who was present in the Caffè Florian when the thing happened."

"Did the Venetian know Marchant?"

The words came slowly from dry lips, the voice was thick and husky; but neither Mrs. Vansittart nor Mr. Sefton wondered that Eve Marchant's lover should be deeply moved.

"I don't know; but there were people in Venice who knew him, and from whom Ferrari heard his mode and manner of life."

"But you said that Marchant was living under an assumed name."

"Did I?" asked Sefton, surprised. "I don't remember saying it, but it is the fact all the same. At Venice Harold Marchant called himself Smith; and Smith was the name he gave on board the P. and O. steamer which took him to Alexandria."

"Why did he go to Alexandria?"

"Why? To get away from Venice in the quickest and completest manner he could. When

he saw that the knife had been fatal, he grasped the situation in an instant, made a dash for the door, ran through the crowd along the Piazzetta, jumped into the water, and swam to the steamer, which was getting up steam for departure. No one guessed that he would make for the steamer. It was a longish swim; and while his pursuers were groping about among the gondolas the steamer was moving off with Harold on board her. Just like him—always quick at expedients; ready at every point where his own interests were at stake; tricky, shifty, dishonest to the core; but a devil for pluck, and as strong as a young lion.”

“I begin to remember the story, now you recall the details,” said Vansittart, who had by this time mastered every sign of agitation, and was firm as iron. “But in all that you have said I see nothing to fix Harold Marchant as the homicide. He might as easily have been the man who was killed.”

“No, no; the man who was killed was a stranger—a Cook’s tourist, a nobody, about whose fate there were no inquiries. It was Marchant who was the Venetian girl’s protector. It was

Marchant who was jealous. The whole story is in perfect accord with Marchant's character. I have seen his temper in a row—seen him when, if he had had a knife within his reach, by Heaven! he would have used it."

"But where is the link between Marchant—Marchant at the diamond fields, Marchant at New York—and the man at Venice calling himself Smith? You don't even pretend to show me that."

"Ferrari shall show you that. The story is a long one, but there is no solution of continuity. Ferrari shall take you over the ground, step by step, till he brings you from Marchant's return from Mashonaland to Marchant's landing at Alexandria."

"And after the landing at Alexandria? What then? The thing happened more than three years ago, you say. Did the earth open and swallow Harold Marchant after he landed at Alexandria? Or, if not, what has he been doing since? Why has not your Ferrari—this courier-guide who is so clever at tracing people—traced him a little further? Why should the last link of the chain be the landing at Alexandria?"

“Because, as I have been telling you, Harold Marchant is an uncommonly clever fellow; and having got off with a whole skin—escaping the penalty of a crime which at the least was manslaughter—he would take very good care to sink his identity ever afterwards, and in all probability would bid a long farewell to the old world.”

“But your genius—your heaven-born detective—would track him down in the new world. My dear Sefton, the whole story is a farrago of rubbish; and I wonder that you, as a man of the world, can be taken in by so vulgar a trickster as your incomparable Ferrari.”

“He is not a trickster. I have the strongest reasons, from past experience, for believing in his honesty and honour. Will you see him, Vansittart? Will you hear his story, calmly and dispassionately?”

“I will not see him. I will not hear his story. I will see no man who trumps up a sensational charge against my future wife’s brother. I can quite understand that you believe in this man—that you have brought this tissue of nonsense to my mother and me in all good faith.”

"Why tissue of nonsense? You admit that you remember there was such a catastrophe—an English traveller killed by an English resident in a Venetian caffè in Carnival time."

"Yes; but plain fact degenerates into nonsense when your courier tries to fasten the crime upon Eve Marchant's brother."

"Hear, or read his statement, before you pronounce judgment. He had his facts from people who knew this young man in New York as Harold Marchant, who met him afterwards in Venice, and visited him at his Venetian lodgings, and played cards with him, when he was calling himself Smith—respectable American citizens, whose names and addresses are set down in Ferrari's statement. I am not utterly wanting in logic, Mr. Vansittart, and if the circumstantial evidence in this matter had been obviously weak I should never have troubled Mrs. Vansittart or you with the story."

The mother spoke now for the first time since Sefton had begun his revelation. Her voice was low and sympathetic. Her son might doubt her wisdom, but he could not doubt her love.

"I am deeply sorry for you, Jack," she said,

“deeply sorry for poor Eve, who is a blameless victim of evil surroundings, but I cannot think that you will obstinately adhere to your engagement in the face of these dreadful acts. It would have been quite bad enough to be Colonel Marchant’s son-in-law; but you cannot seriously mean to marry a girl whose brother has committed murder.”

“It was not murder,” cried Vansittart, furiously. “Even Mr. Sefton there acknowledges that the crime at most was only manslaughter—a fatal blow, struck in a moment of blind passion.”

“With a dagger against an unarmed man,” interjected Sefton. “You are inclined to minimize the crime when you call it manslaughter at the most. I said that at the least—taking the most indulgent view of the case—the crime was manslaughter; and I doubt if an Italian tribunal would have dealt very leniently with that kind of manslaughter. I take it that quick run and long swim of his saved Harold Marchant some years of captivity in an Italian prison.”

“It is too horrible,” said Mrs. Vansittart. “My dear, dear son, for God’s sake don’t underrate the horror of it all because of your love for this poor

girl. You cannot marry a girl whose brother is an unconvicted murderer."

How she harped upon the word murder! Vansittart ground his nails into the palms of his clasped hands, as he stood up, frowning darkly, in an agony of indignant feeling. His mother to be so womanish, so illogical, so foolish in her exaggeration of evil.

"I say again, the man who struck that unlucky blow was no murderer. The word is a cruel and a lying word applied to him," he protested. "The story you have told me—the crime you try to fix upon Harold Marchant—can make no shadow of difference in my love for Harold Marchant's sister. Had she ten brothers, and every one of the ten were a felon, I would marry her. It is her I love, mother—not her surroundings. And as for your modern fad of heredity, I believe in it no more than I do in table-turning. God made my Eve—as pure, and single, and primitive a being as that other Eve in His Garden of Eden; and over the morning of her fair life no act of her kindred can cast a shadow."

There was a silence. Sefton had risen when Vansittart rose. He took up his hat, and came

through the flickering lights and shadows towards Mrs. Vansittart, who sat with drooping head and clasped hands, betwixt sorrow and anger—sorrow for her son's suffering, anger at his obstinate adherence to the girl he loved. She gave Sefton her hand mechanically, without looking up.

“Good night, Vansittart,” said Sefton, as he moved towards the door. “I can only admire your loyalty to Miss Marchant, though I may question your wisdom. She is a very charming person, I grant you; but, after all”—with a little laugh—“she is not the only woman in the world.”

“She is the only woman in my world.”

“Really?”

The intonation of this one word, the slight shrug of the shoulders, were a revelation. Vansittart perceived the covert sneer in that parting speech, and saw in it an allusion to that lovely foreigner whom Sefton had seen hanging affectionately upon his arm a few days ago on the Chelsea Embankment.

“One word, Mr. Sefton,” said Vansittart, in a peremptory tone. “I take it that your employment of detectives and couriers—that all you have done in this business—has been done out of

regard for an old schoolfellow and college chum, who was once your friend, and from a kindly desire to relieve Miss Marchant's anxiety about a brother whom—whom she appears to have dearly loved. I think, under these circumstances, I need not urge upon you the necessity of keeping this unhappy business to yourself—so far as she is concerned."

"You are right. I shall say nothing to Miss Marchant."

"Remember that, clever as your courier may be, he is not infallible. The case is only a case of suspicion. The Smith, of Venice, may be anybody. One missing link in your amateur detective's chain of evidence, and the whole fabrication would drop to pieces. Don't let Miss Marchant be tortured needlessly. Promise me that you will never tell her this story."

"On my honour, I will not."

"I thank you for that promise, and I beg you to forgive any undue vehemence upon my part just now."

"There is nothing to forgive—I can sympathize with your feelings. Good night."

"Good night."

Vansittart dined in Bruton Street, as he had promised, sat by his betrothed, and listened to her happy talk of the things they had seen and the people they had met, sat behind her chair all through Boïto's opera, unhearing, unseeing, his mind for ever and for ever travelling over the same ground, acting over and over again the same scene—the row at Florian's, the scuffle, the fall—his own fall—the knife; and then that fatal fall of his adversary, that one gasping, surprised cry of the unarmed man, slain unawares.

Her brother! His victim, and her brother. The nearest, dearest kin of this girl on whose milk-white shoulder his breath came and went, as he sat with bent head in the shadow of the velvet curtain, and heard the weird strange harmonies of Pandemonium, almost as if voices and orchestra had been interpreting his own dark thoughts.

Charmed as she was with the music, Eve Marchant was far too sensitive to be unconscious of her lover's altered spirits. Once during the applause that followed that lovely duet at the beginning of the last act, and while Lady Hartley's attention was fixed upon the stage, Eve's hand crept stealthily into the hand of her

lover, while she whispered, "What has happened, Jack? I know there is something wrong. Why won't you trust me?"

Trust her? Trust her with a secret that must part them for ever, let her suffer the agony of knowing that this strong right hand which her slim fingers were caressing had stabbed her brother to the heart?

"There can be nothing wrong, dearest, while I have you," he answered, grasping the little hand, as if he would never let it go.

"But outside me, you have been worried about something. You have quite changed from your gay spirits at Hurlingham."

"My love, I exhausted myself at Hurlingham. You and I were laughing like children. That can't last. But for me there is no outside world. Be sure of that. My world begins and ends where you are."

"My own dear love," she whispered softly.

And so hand in hand they listened to the last act, while Lady Hartley amused herself now with the stage, and now with the audience, and left these plighted lovers alone in their fool's paradise.

Sunday was given up to church and church parade, looking at people and gowns and bonnets in Hyde Park. Vansittart had to be observant and ready, amusing and amused, as he walked beside his sister and his betrothed. He had to say smart things about the people and the bonnets, to explain and give brief biographies of all the men whom he saluted, or with whom he spoke. He had to do this, and to be gay and light-hearted in the drive to Richmond, and at the late luncheon in the pretty upstairs room at the Star and Garter, where the balcony hung high over the smiling valley, over the river that meanders in gracious curves through wooded meadows and past the rustic townlet of "Twicks." Happiness is the dominant in the scale of prosperous love. Why or how should he fail to be happy, adored by this sweet girl, who in less than six weeks was to be his very own, to have and to hold till death?

He played his part admirably, was really happy during some of those frivolous hours, telling himself that the thing which had happened at Venice was a casualty for which Fate could never lean hardly upon him.

"Even *Cædipus Rex* had a good time of it after he killed his father at the cross roads," he told himself mockingly. "It was not till his daughters were grown up that troubles began. He had a long run of prosperity. And so, Dame Fortune, give me my darling, and let her not know for the next twenty years that this right hand is red with her kindred's blood. Let her not know! And after twenty years of bliss—well, let the volcano explode, if need be, and bury me in the ashes. I shall have lived my life."

He parted with Eve in Bruton Street after tea. She was going to an evening service with Lady Hartley. They were to hear a famous preacher, while the mundane Sir Hubert dined at Greenwich with some men. Eve was to leave Waterloo Station early next morning, and as Lady Hartley was sending her maid to see the young lady and her luggage safely lodged at the Homestead, Vansittart was told he would not be wanted.

"This is a free country," he said. "You will find me at the station to say good-bye."

He went home to dine with his mother, a very melancholy dinner. Mrs. Vansittart's pale cheeks bore traces of tears, and she was obviously un-

happy, although she struggled to keep up appearances, talked about the weather, the sermon she had heard in the morning, the dinner, anything to make conversation while the servants were in the room.

Vansittart followed her to the drawing-room directly after dinner, and seated himself by her side in the lamplight, and laid his hand on hers as it turned the pages of the book upon her knee.

“Canon Liddon is a delightful writer, mother; logical, clear-headed, and eloquent, and you could hardly have a better book than his Bampton Lectures for Sunday evening; but you might spare a few minutes for your son.”

“As many minutes or as many hours as you like, Jack,” answered his mother, as she closed the book. “My thoughts are too full of you to follow any writer who wants close attention. My dear son, what can I say to you? Do you really mean to persist in this miserable alliance?”

“Oh, mother, how cruel you are even in your kindness! How cruel a mother’s love can be! It is not a miserable alliance—it is the marriage of true minds. Remember what your Shakespeare says, ‘Let me not to the marriage of true

minds admit impediments.' Will you, mother, admit impediments here, where practically there is none?"

"Jack, Jack, love has made you blind. Is the existence of that wicked young man no impediment—a man who may at any day be tried for his life as a murderer?"

"Again, mother, I say he was no murderer. The utmost that can be urged against this wicked young man is that he was a hot-tempered athlete who killed a man in a scuffle. Let us forget his existence, if we can. There is nothing in this life more unlikely than that we shall ever hear of him again. From that night in the Venetian caffè he ceased to exist—at any rate for England and his kindred. Be sure, mother, that Harold Marchant will never be heard of again."

"You believe what you wish to believe, Jack, and you forget the French proverb that nothing is so likely to happen as the unexpected."

"No, I don't, mother. That useful adage has been borne in upon me of late. But now, dearest and best, let us be at peace for ever upon this question. I mean to marry my beloved, and I mean you to love her, second only to Maud and

me. She is ready to love you with all her heart—with all the stored-up feeling of those motherless years in which she has grown from child to woman, without the help of a mother's love. You are not going to shut your heart against her, are you, mother?"

"No, Jack, not if she is to be your wife. I love you far too well to withhold my love from your wife."

"That's my own true mother."

On this mother and son, between whom there had hung a faint cloud of displeasure, kissed, not without tears; and it was agreed that for these two henceforward the name of Harold Marchant should be a dead letter.

CHAPTER VI.

TO LIVE FORGOTTEN AND LOVE FORLORN.

VANSITTART had made up his mind. Were that which he accounted at present but a dark suspicion made absolute certainty he meant still to cleave to the girl whom he had chosen for his wife, and who had given him her whole heart. He would marry her, even although his hand had shed her brother's blood, that brother whom of all her kindred she loved best, with the most ardent and romantic love, with the fond affection which clings round the image of a friend lost in childhood, when the feelings are warmest, and when love asks no questions.

Once, in the little end room in Bruton Street, between two stolen kisses, he said to her, "You pretend to be very fond of me, Eve. I wonder whom you love next best?"

“Harold,” she answered quickly. “I used to think I should never give any one his place in my heart. But you have stolen the first place. He is only second now, poor dear—dead or living, only second.”

The tears welled up in her eyes as she spoke of him. A brother is not often loved so fondly; hardly ever, unless he is a scamp.

And would she marry him, Jack Vansittart, if she knew that he had killed her brother? Alas, no! That dark story would make an impassable gulf between them. Loving him with all her heart, dependent upon him for all the happiness and prosperity of her future life, she would sacrifice herself and him to the manes of that worthless youth, slain by the man his brutality had provoked to responsive violence.

“There was not much to choose between us,” Vansittart told himself; “ruffians both. And are two lives to be blighted because of those few moments of fury, in which the brute got the upper hand of the man? No, a thousand times no. I will marry her, and let Fate do the worst to us both. Fate can but part us. Why should I anticipate evil by taking the initiative? A

man who has happiness in his hand and lets it go, for any compunctions of conscience, may be a fine moral character, but he is not the less a fool. Life is not long enough for scruples that part faithful lovers."

He looked the situation full in the face. He told himself that it was for Eve's welfare as well as for his own that he should keep from her the knowledge of his wrong-doing. Would she be happier, would mankind be any the better off for his self-abnegation, if he should tell her the truth, and accept his dismissal? Knowing what he knew she could scarcely lay her hand in his and take him for her husband; but once the vow spoken, once his wife, he thought that she might even forgive him her brother's blood.

She must never know! He had blustered and raged in that troubled scene with Sefton; but sober reflection taught him that if he were to be safe in the future he must conciliate the man he hated. A word from Sefton could spoil his happiness; and he could not afford to be ill friends with the man who had power to speak that word; nor could he afford to arouse that man's suspicions by any eccentricity of conduct

on his own part. He had refused to hear the story of Harold Marchant's life from the courier's lips, as Sefton suggested, had refused with scornful vehemence. But reflection told him that he ought to examine the courier's chain of evidence, and to discover for himself if the links were strong enough to make Harold Marchant's identity with Fiordelisa's lover an absolute certainty. He wanted to know the worst, not to be fooled and made miserable by the illogical imaginings of an amateur detective. Again, it was natural that a man in his position should look closely into this story, testing its accuracy by the severest scrutiny; and he wanted to act naturally, to act as Sefton would expect him to act.

Influenced by these considerations, he called in Tite Street on Monday afternoon, and found Sefton at home, in a room which occupied the entire first floor of a smallish house, but which could be made into two rooms by drawing a curtain.

It was the most luxurious room that Vansittart had seen for a long time, but there was a studied sobriety in its luxury which marked the man of sense as well as the sybarite. The colouring was subdued—dull olive-green—without relief save

from a few pieces of old Italian black and white inlaid furniture, a writing-table, a coffer, a book-case. Every inch of the floor was carpeted with dark-brown velvet pile. No slippery parquetry or sham oak here, no gaudy variety of Oriental prayer-rugs or furry trophies of the chase. Capacious armchairs tempted to idleness; a choice selection of the newest and oldest books invited to study; two large windows looking east and west flooded the room with light; and a fireplace wide enough for a baronial hall promised heat and cheerfulness when frosts and fogs combine to make London odious.

“You like my den,” said Sefton, when Vansittart murmured his surprise at finding so good a room in so small a house. “Comfortable, ain’t it? The house is small, but I’ve reduced the number of rooms to three. Below I have only a dining-room; above, only my bedroom. There is a rabbit-hutch at the back of the landing for my valet, and a garret in the roof for the women. Living in a colony of artists, I have taken pains to keep clear of everything artistic. I have neither stained glass nor tapestry, neither Raffaele ware nor bronze idols; but I can offer

my friends a comfortable chair and a decently cooked dinner. I hope you'll put my professions to the test some evening, when I can get one or two of my clever neighbours to meet you."

Vansittart professed himself ready to dine with Mr. Sefton on any occasion, and straightway proceeded to the business of his visit.

"You were good enough to suggest that I should see the courier, Ferrari," he said, "and I was impolite enough to refuse—rather roughly, I fear."

"You were certainly a little rough," answered Sefton, with his suave smile, "but I could make allowances for a man in your position. I honour the warmth of your feelings; and I admire the chivalry which makes you indifferent to the belongings of the woman you love."

"That which you are pleased to call chivalry, I take to be the natural conduct of any man in such circumstances. Honestly, now, Mr. Sefton, would you give up the girl you love if you found her brother had been the—the chief actor in such a scene as that row in the Venetian caffè? Would you spoil her life and your own for such a reason?"

“Well, I suppose not; if I were tremendously in love. But the sweets of life would be considerably soured, to my mind, by the apprehension of such a brother-in-law’s reappearance, or by any unlooked-for concatenation which might bring his personality into the foreground.”

“I am willing to risk such a concatenation. In the mean time it has occurred to me that I ought to see Ferrari, and look into his story dispassionately. If you will kindly give me his address I will write and ask him to call upon me.”

“You will find him a very good fellow—a splendid animal, with a fair intelligence,” said Sefton, writing an address. “And now I hope you have forgiven me for bringing an unpleasant train of circumstances under your notice. You must remember that the facts in question came to my knowledge solely from my wish to oblige Miss Marchant. It would not have been fair to you to leave you in ignorance of what so nearly concerned your future wife.”

“Certainly not; but it would have been kinder, or wiser, on your part to have kept this knowledge from my mother.”

“Mrs. Vansittart had won my warmest regard

by her kindness to the son of an old friend. I felt my first duty was to her."

"That was unwise; and your unwisdom has caused much pain. However, I thank you for having spared Miss Marchant the knowledge that would make her miserable. I may rely upon you to keep the secret always—may I not?" asked Vansittart, earnestly.

"Always. You have my promise."

"Thank you. That sets my mind at rest. I know how to deal with my mother's prejudices; and I know that her affection for Eve will overcome those prejudices—in good time."

Ferrari called at Charles Street at eleven o'clock next morning, in accordance with Vansittart's request. As the clock struck the hour a tall, good-looking man, with reddish-brown hair, reddish-brown eyes, and a cheerful, self-satisfied smile, was ushered into Vansittart's study.

"You are punctual, Signor Ferrari. Sit down, please, and come to business at once. Mr. Sefton tells me that you are the most precise and business-like of men, as well as the best of fellows."

"Mr. Sefton have know me many years, sir. I have had the honour to nurse the of him father in his last illness. Ten years ago we was at Venice, at the Grand Hotel—Mr. Sefton's father threw himself out of the window in a paroxis of pain—I pick him out of the canal at risk of my life. The son does not forget what Ferrari did for the father."

Those who knew Ferrari intimately discovered that this rescuing of would-be suicides from the Grand Canal was an idiosyncrasy of his. He affected to have saved half the distinguished travellers of Europe in this manner.

"Now, Signor Ferrari, you have no doubt considered that the charge you have brought against Mr. Harold Marchant is a very serious one——"

"Scusatemi, illustrissimo gentleman, I bring no charge," protested Ferrari, in his curious English, which he spoke with an American accent, having improved his knowledge of the language in the society of American travellers, few of whom condescended to Italian or even French. "I bring no charge. Mr. Sefton tell me, trace for me the movements of a young man

called 'Arol Marchant. Find him for me. He was last heard of with a party of explorers in Mashonaland. He good shot. Kill big game. With these bare facts I set to work, I am one who never stop. I am like the devil in Job, always going to and fro over the earth. I know men in all parts; couriers, interpreters, servants of every class, money-changers, shipping agents. From among these I get my information, and here it is tabulated. It is for the illustrissimo to judge for herself, having seen my facts."

He opened a neat little book, where, upon ruled paper, appeared a record of the movements of Harold Marchant from the hour of his appearing at the diamond fields to his return from New York with a party of Americans, in whose company he put up at the Hotel di Roma, Pension Suisse, on the Grand Canal.

When he was at the Hotel di Roma he was known as Marchant. His signature was in the visitors' book at the hotel. Ferrari had seen it, and had recorded the date, which was in the September preceding that February in which Vansittart had shared in the gaieties of the Carnival at Venice. A fortnight later Mr.

Marchant took a second floor in the Campo Goldoni, under the name of Smith. There was no doubt in the courier's mind as to the identity of the man in the Campo Goldoni with the man at the Hotel di Roma. He had talked with a New Yorker who had known Marchant under both names, and who knew of his relations with the pretty lace-maker. But there was nothing in Ferrari's statement which could be called proof positive of this identity. The facts rested on information obtained at second hand. It was open to Vansittart to doubt—since error was not impossible—error as complete as that mistake which had put the man who was killed in the place of the man who killed him.

Ferrari tracked the fugitive on his voyage to Alexandria : recorded the name of Smith given to the captain of the P. and O. After Alexandria there was nothing.

“Do you think he came back to Europe by another steamer?” asked Vansittart, testing the all-knowing Venetian.

“Not he, Altissimo. Having once set his foot upon the soil of Africa he would be too wise to risk a return to Europe. He might go to India,

to America—north or south—but he would not come to England, to answer for the English life which he had taken. You Englishmen set great store upon life.”

Vansittart dismissed the man with a present, but before he went Ferrari laid his card upon the table, and begged that if ever the illustrissimo required a courier or a travelling servant, he, Ferrari, might be remembered.

When he was gone Vansittart took up his pen and wrote hastily to Sefton.

“DEAR MR. SEFTON,

“Your excellent Ferrari has been here, and I have gone carefully through his statement. It is plausible, but by no means convincing; and I see ample room for error in a chain of facts which rest upon hearsay. Under these conditions I am more than ever desirous that no hint of Ferrari’s story should reach Miss Marchant. Forgive me for reminding you of your promise. It would be a deplorable business if this dear girl were made unhappy about a chimera.

“I go to Redwold to-morrow, and shall stay

over Whitsuntide. We are to be married before the end of June, very quietly, at Fernhurst Church.

“Yours sincerely,

“J. VANSITTART.”

He rather despised himself for writing in this friendly strain to a man for whom he had an instinctive dislike; but he tried to believe that his dislike was mere prejudice, and that Mr. Sefton's manner with Eve, to which he had taken such violent objection, was only Mr. Sefton's manner to young women in general; a bad manner, but without any sinister feeling underlying it—only a bad manner.

To-morrow he was to go to Redwold, to be his sister's guest till after Whitsuntide, or until the wedding, if he pleased. And before June was pushed aside by her sultrier sister July, he was to be Eve Marchant's husband. Every day of his life brought that union a day nearer. It had come now to the counting of days. It seemed to him as if time and the calendar were no more—as if he and his love were being swept along in the strong current of their happiness. He could

think of nothing, care for nothing but Eve. His bailiff's letters, his lawyer's letters, remained unanswered. He could not bring himself even to consider his mother's suggestions as to this or that improvement or alteration at Merewood, whither Mrs. Vansittart was going at Whitsuntide, to prepare all things for the coming of the bride, and to arrange for her own removal.

"Do as much or as little as you like, mother," Vansittart said. "You need alter nothing. Eve will be pleased with things as they are."

"It will be a great change for her from a cottage," sighed Mrs. Vansittart. "I'm afraid she will be bewildered and overpowered by a large household. She can have no idea of managing servants."

"The servants can manage themselves, mother. I don't want a managing wife. Yet from what I have seen of Eve in her own home I take her to be well up in domestic matters. Everything at the Homestead seemed the essence of comfort."

He remembered his wintry tea-drinking, the tea and toast, the cake and jam-pots, and Eve's radiant face; the firelight on Eve's hair; the sense of quiet happiness which pervaded the

place where his love was queen. It seemed to him that there could not have been one inharmonious note in that picture. Order and beauty and domestic peace were there. Should Fate reduce him to poverty he could be utterly happy with his love in just such a home. He wanted neither splendid surroundings nor brilliant society.

Having heard all that Ferrari could tell him, he felt easier in his mind than he had felt since that unpleasant hour with his mother and Sefton on Saturday evening. The more he thought of the courier's chain of evidence, the weaker it seemed to him. No, he could not think that the man he had killed was the brother of the woman he was going to marry. He tried to recall the man's face; but the suddenness and the fury of that brief encounter had afforded no time for minute observation. The man's face had flashed upon him out of the crowd—fair-haired, fair-skinned; Saxon amidst all those olive complexions—a face and figure that bore down upon him with the impression of physical power; handsome only as the typical gladiator is handsome. What more could he remember? Irre-

gular features, strongly marked ; a low forehead ; and light blue eyes. The Marchants were a blue-eyed race, but that went for little in a country where the majority of eyes are blue or grey.

Vansittart remembered his promise to visit Fiordelisa and her aunt ; and as this was his last day in London, perhaps, for some time—since London was but a wilderness of brick now Eve was gone—he gave up his afternoon to the performance of that promise. Tuesday was one of the Professor's days ; and he had promised to see the Professor and hear his opinion of Signora Vivanti's progress.

Since that painful hour on Saturday he had thought much and seriously of the impulsive Venetian, and of his relations with her—relations which he felt to be full of peril. It had occurred to him that there was only one way to secure Fiordelisa's future welfare, while strictly maintaining his own incognito, and that was by the purchase of an annuity. It would cost him some thousands to capitalize that income of two hundred a year, which he had resolved to allow Lisa ; but he had reserves which he could afford

to draw upon, the accumulations of his minority, at present invested in railway stock. Any lesser sacrifice would appear to him too poor an atonement; for after all, it was possible that, but for him, Fiordelisa's Englishman might have kept his promise and married her. No, Vansittart did not think he would be doing too much in securing these two women against poverty for the rest of their lives—and the annuity once bought he would be justified in disappearing out of Fiorde-lisa's life, and leaving her in ignorance of his name and belongings.

He spent an hour with his lawyer before going to Chelsea, and from that gentleman obtained all needful information as to the proper manner of purchasing an annuity, and the best people with whom to invest his money.

This done, he walked across the Park, and arrived at Saltero's Mansion on the stroke of four. Lisa had told him that her lesson lasted from three to four, so he had timed himself to meet the maestro.

The ripe round notes of Lisa's mezzo soprano rose full and strong in one of Conconi's exercises

as la Zia opened the door. She attacked a florid passage with force and precision, ran rapidly up the scale to A sharp, and held the high note long and clear as the call of a bird.

“Brava, brava,” cried Signor Zinco, banging down a chord and rising from the piano as Vansittart entered.

Lisa flew to meet him. She was in her plain black frock, with no collar, only a bit of scarlet ribbon tied round her throat, and another bit of scarlet tying up her great untidy knot of blue-black hair. The rusty black gown, the scarlet ribbons, the olive face, with its carnation flush and star-like eyes, made a brilliant picture after the school of Murillo. Vansittart could but see that she was strikingly handsome—just the kind of woman to take the town by storm, if she were once seen and heard in opera bouffe.

Zinco was a little old man, short and fat, with no more figure than an eighteen-gallon cask. He had a large bald head, and benevolent eyes. He was very shabby. His coat, which might once have been black, was now a dull green—his old grey trousers were kneed and frayed, his old fat hands were dirty.

“ Ah, I thought you had forgotten me again,” said Lisa. “ But you are here at last ; and now ask the master if he is pleased with me.”

“ I am more than pleased,” began Zinco, bowing and smiling at Vansittart as one who would fain have prostrated himself at the feet of so exalted a patron.

“ Stay,” cried Lisa. “ You shall not talk of me before my face. I will go and make the tea—and then Zinco will tell you the truth, Si’or mio, the very truth about me. He will not be obliged to praise.”

She dashed out of the room, as if blown out on a strong wind, so impetuous were her movements. La Zia began to clear a table for tea, a table heaped with sheets of music and play-books. Fiordelisa had been learning English out of Gilbert’s librettos, which were harder work for her than Metastasio for an English student.

“ Well, Signor Zinco, what do you think of your pupil ? ” asked Vansittart.

“ Sir, she is of a marvellous natural. She has an enormous talent, and with that talent an enormous energy. She is destined to a prodigious success upon the English scene.”

“I am delighted to hear it.”

“She has all the qualities which succeed with your English people—a fine voice, a fine person, and pardon me if I add, an audacity, a vulgarity which will command applause. Were I more diplomatist I should say genius—where I say vulgarity—but this divine creature is adorably vulgar. She has no nerves. I say to her sing, and she sings. ‘Attack me the A sharp,’ and she attacks, and the note rings out like a bell. She is without nerves, and she is without self-consciousness, and she has the courage of a lion. She has worked as no pupil of mine ever worked before. She is mastering your difficult language in as many months as it cost me years. She has laboured at the theory of music, and though she is in most things of a surprising ignorance, she has made no mean progress in that difficult science. She has worked as Garcia’s gifted daughter worked; and were this age worthy of a second Malibran, she has in her the stuff to make a Malibran.”

The fat little maestro stopped for breath, not for words. He stood mopping his forehead and smiling at Vansittart, who was inclined to believe

in his sincerity, for that *roulade* he had heard at the door just now displayed a voice of brilliant quality.

“You are enthusiastic, Signor Zinco,” he said quietly. “And pray when you have trained this fine voice to the uttermost what do you intend to do with it?”

“I hope to place the Signora in the way of making her fortune. Were you English a nation of music lovers, I should say to this dear lady, give yourself up to hard study of classical opera for the next three years, before you allow yourself to be heard in public; but pardon me if I say, Signor, you English are not connoisseurs. You are taken with show and brilliancy. You think more of youth and beauty in the *prima donna* than of finish or deep feeling in the singer. Before your winter season of opera bouffe shall begin the Signora will have learnt enough to ensure her a *succes fou*. I count upon getting her engaged at the Apollo Theatre in November. There is a new opera being written for the Apollo—an opera in which I am told there are several female characters, and there will be a chance for a new singer. I have already spoken to the

manager of the Apollo, and he has promised to hear the Signora sing before concluding his autumn engagements."

"Festina lente, Signor Zinco. You are going at railroad pace. Do not spoil the Signora's future by a hasty *début*."

"Have no fear, sir. She will have all the summer for practice, and for further progress in English. A foreign accent will be no disadvantage. It takes with an English audience. You have had so many sham Italians in opera that it will be well to have a real one."

The Maestro bowed himself out, as Fiordelisa came in with the tea-tray, beaming with smiles, happy and important. She placed a chair for Vansittart by the open window. She arranged the light bamboo table in front of him, and began to pour out the tea, while la Zia seated herself at a little distance.

"I have learnt to make tea in your English fashion," Lisa said gaily, as she handed the tea-cups. "Strong, oh, so strong. No *xe vero*? Our neighbour on the upper floor taught me. She laughed at my tea one day when she came to see me. And now, what did little Zinco

say? He always pretends to be satisfied with me."

"He praised you to the skies. He says you will make your fortune in opera."

"And do you like operas?" Lisa asked, after a thoughtful pause.

"I adore music of all kinds, except hurdy-gurdies and banjos."

"And will you come sometimes to hear me sing?"

"Assuredly! With the greatest pleasure."

"I shall owe fame and fortune to you, if ever I am famous or rich," said Lisa, seating herself on a low stool by the window, in the full afternoon sunlight, basking in the brightness and warmth.

"What has become of Paolo?" asked Vansittart, looking round the room, where some scattered toys reminded him of the child's existence.

"Paolo has gone to tea with the lady on the top floor. She has three little girls and a boy, and they all love *el puttelo*. They let him play with their toys and pull their hair. Hark! there they go."

A wild gallop of little feet across the ceiling testified to the animation of the party.

“He has been there all the afternoon. He is a bold, bad boy, and so full of mischief,” said Lisa, with evident pride. “He is very big for his age, people say, and as active as a monkey. You must go and fetch him directly you have had your tea, *Carina mia*,” she added to her aunt. “He has been with those children nearly two hours. He will be awake all night with excitement.”

“Is he excitable?” asked Vansittart, who felt a new and painful interest in this child of a nameless parent.

“Oh, he is terrible. He is ready to jump out of the window when he is happy. He throws himself down on the floor, and kicks and screams till he is black in the face, when he is not allowed to do what he likes. He is only a baby, and yet he is our master. That is because he is a man, I suppose. We were created to be your slaves, were we not, *Si’or mio*? *La Zia* spoils him.”

La Zia protested that the boy was goodness itself—a cherub, an angel. He wanted nothing in life but his own way. And he was so strong, so big, and so beautiful that people turned in the streets to look at him.

"Among all the children in Battersea Park I have never seen his equal. And he is not yet three years old. He fought with a boy of six, and sent him away howling. He is a marvel."

"When he is old enough I shall send him to a gymnasium," said Lisa. "I want him to be an athlete, like his father. He told me once that he won cups and prizes at the University by his strength. Oh, how white you have turned!" she cried, distressed at the ghastly change in Vansittart's face. "I forgot. I forgot. I ought not to have spoken of him. I never will speak of him again. We will forget that he ever existed."

She hung over his chair. She took up his hand and kissed it.

"Forgive me! Forgive me!" she murmured, with tears.

Unmoved by this little scene, La Zia emptied her teacup, rose, and left the room; and they two—Vansittart and Fiordelisa—were alone.

"You know that I would not pain you for the world," she sighed. "You have been so good to me, my true and only friend."

"No, no, Si'ora; I know that you would not willingly recall that memory which is branded

deep upon my heart and brain. I can never forget. Do not believe even that I wish to forget. I sinned ; and I must suffer for my sin. My friendship for you and for your good aunt arose out of that sin. I want to atone to you as far as I can for that fatal act. You understand that, I am sure."

"Yes, yes ; I understand. But you like us, don't you ?" she pleaded. "You are really our friend ?"

"I am really your friend. And I want to prove my friendship by settling an income upon you, in such a manner that you will not be dependent upon my will or forethought for the payment of that income. It will be paid to you as regularly as the quarter-day comes round. I am going to buy you an annuity, Lisa ; that is to say, an income which will be paid to you till the end of your life ; so that whether you make your fortune as a singer or not, you can never know extreme poverty."

"But who will give me the money when quarter-day comes ?"

"It will be sent to you from an office. You will have no trouble about it."

"I should hate that. I would rather have the money from your hand. It is you who give it me—not the man at the office. I want to kiss my benefactor's hand. You are my benefactor. That was one of the first words I taught myself after I came to this house. Bén-é-factor!" she repeated, with her Italian accent; "it is easier than most of your English words."

"Cara Si'ora, I may be far away. It would be a bad thing for you to depend on my memory for the means of living. Let us be reasonable and business-like. I shall see to this matter tomorrow. And now, good-bye."

He rose, and took up his hat. Lisa hung about him, very pale, and with her full lower lip pouting and quivering like the lip of a child that is trying not to cry.

"Why are you doing this; why are you changing to me?" she asked piteously.

"I am not changing, Lisa. There is no thought of change in me. Only you must be reasonable. There is a dark secret between us—the memory of that fatal night in Venice. It is not well that we should meet often. We cannot see each other without remembering——"

"I remember nothing when I am with you—gnente, gnente!" she cried passionately. "Nothing except that I love you—love you with all my heart and soul."

She tried to throw herself upon his breast, but as he recoiled, astonished and infinitely pained, she fell on her knees at his feet, and clasped his hand in both of hers, and kissed and cried over it.

"I love you," she repeated; "and you—you have loved me—you must have loved me—a little. No man was ever so kind as you have been, except for love's sake. You must have cared for me. You cared for me that day in Venice—the happiest day in my life. Your heart turned to me as my heart turned to you, in the sunshine on the lagune, in the evening at the theatre. Every day that I have lived since then has strengthened my love. For God's sake, don't tell me that I am nothing to you."

"You are very much to me, Lisa. You are a friend for whom I desire all good things that this world and the world that comes after death can give. Get off your knees, child. This is mere foolishness—a child's foolishness; no wiser than Paolo's anger when you won't let him have

all his own way. Come, Si'ora mia, let us laugh and be friends."

He tried to make light of her feelings ; but she gave him a look that frightened him, a look of unmitigated despair.

"I thought you loved me; that by-and-by, when I was a famous singer, you would marry me. I should be good enough then to be your wife. You would forget that I was once a poor working girl at Burano. But I was foolish ; yes, foolish. I could never be good enough to be your wife—I, the mother of Paolo. Let me go on loving you. Only come to see me sometimes—once a week, perhaps! The weeks are so long when you don't come. Only care for me a little, just a little, and I shall be happy. See how little I am asking. Don't forsake me, don't abandon me."

"There is nothing further from my thoughts than to forsake you; but if you make scenes of this kind I can never trust myself to come here again," he answered sternly.

"You will never come here again!" she cried, looking at him with wild, wide-open eyes. "Then I will not live without you; I cannot, I will not."

The window stood open with its balcony and

flowers, and the sunlit river, and the sunlit park and dim blue horizon of house-tops and chimneys stretching away to the hills of Sydenham. The girl looked at him for a moment, clenched her teeth, clenched her hands, and made a rush for the balcony. Happily he was quick enough and strong enough to stop her with one outstretched arm. He took her by the shoulder, savagely almost, with something of the brutal roughness of her old lover it might be, but with no love. Beautiful as she was in her passionate self-abandonment, he felt nothing for her in that moment but an angry contempt, which he was at little pains to conceal.

The revulsion of feeling upon that wild impulse towards self-destruction came quickly enough. The tears rolled down her flushed cheeks, she sank into the chair towards which Vansittart led her, and sat, helpless and unresisting, with her hands hanging loose across the arms of the chair, her head drooping on her breast, the picture of helpless grief.

He could but pity her, seeing her so childlike, so unreasoning, swayed by passion as a lily is bent by the wind. He shut the window, and

bolted it, against any second outbreak; and then he seated himself at Lisa's side and took one of those listless hands in his.

"Let us be reasonable, Si'ora," he said, "and let us be good friends always. If I were not in love with a young English lady whom I hope very shortly to make my wife I might have fallen in love with you."

She gave a melancholy smile, and then a deep sigh.

"No, no, impossible! You would never have cared. I am too low—the mother of Paolo—only fit to be your servant."

"Love pardons much, Lisa; and if my heart had not been given to another your beauty and your frank generous nature might have won me. Only my heart was gone before that night at Covent Garden. It belonged for ever and for ever to my dear English love."

"Your English love! I should like to see her"—with a moody look. "Is she handsome, much handsomer than I?"

"There are some people who would think you the lovelier. Beauty is not all in all, Lisa. We love because we love."

“‘We love because we love,’” she repeated slowly. “Ah, that is what makes it so hard. We cannot help ourselves. Love is destiny.”

“Your destiny was in the past, Lisa. It came to you at Burano.”

“No, no, no. I never cared for him as I have cared for you. I was happier in that one day on the Lido, and that one evening in Venice, than in all my life with him. There was more music in your voice when you spoke to me, ever so lightly, than in all he ever said to me of love. You are my destiny.”

“You will think the same about some one else by-and-by, Si’ora—some one whose heart will be free to love you as you deserve to be loved. You are so young and so pretty and so clever that you must needs win a love worth the winning by-and-by, if you will only be reasonable and live a tranquil, self-respecting life in the meanwhile.”

She shook her head hopelessly.

“I shall never care for any one again,” she said. “No other voice would ever sound sweet in my ears. Don’t despise me; don’t think of me as a shameless creature. I was mad just now. I should never have spoken as I did; but I

thought you cared for me. You were so kind ; you did so much for us."

"I have tried to do my duty, that was all."

"Only duty ! Well, it was a dream, a lovely dream—and it is over."

"Let it go with a smile, Lisa. You have so much to make life pleasant—a face that will charm every one ; a voice that may make your fortune."

"I don't care about fortune."

"Ah, but you will find it very pleasant when it comes—carriages and horses, a fine house, jewels, laurel wreaths, applause, all that is most intoxicating in life. It is for that you have been working so hard."

"No, it is not for that. I have been working only to please you ; so that you should say by-and-by, 'This poor little Lisa, for whom I have taken trouble and spent money, is something more than a common lace-worker, after all.'"

"This poor little Lisa is a genius, I believe, and will have the world at her feet, by-and-by. And now, Si'ora, I must say good-bye. I am going into the country to-morrow."

"For long ?"

"Till after my marriage, perhaps."

"Till after your marriage! And when you are married will you ever come and see me?"

"Perhaps; if you will promise never again to talk as foolishly as you have talked to-day."

"I promise. I promise anything in this world rather than not see you."

"If I come, be sure I shall come as your true and loyal friend. Ah, here is your son," as a babyish prattle made itself heard in the little vestibule.

First came a rattling of the handle, and then the door was burst open, and Paolo rushed in—a sturdy block of a boy, with flaxen hair and great black eyes—a curious compromise between the Saxon father and the Venetian mother; square-shouldered, sturdy, stolid, yet with flashes of southern impetuosity. He was big for his age, very big, standing straight and strong upon the legs of an infant Hercules. He excelled in everything but speech.

Vansittart lifted him in his arms, and looked long and earnestly into the cherubic countenance, which first smiled and then frowned at him. He was trying, in this living picture of the dead, to

see whether he could discover any trace of the Marchant lineaments.

It might be that a foregone conclusion prompted the fancy—that the fear of seeing made him see—but in the turn of the eyebrow and the contour of cheek and chin he thought he recognized lines which were familiar to him in the faces of Eve and her sisters—lines which were not in Fiordelisa's face.

He set the boy down with a sigh.

"Don't spoil him, Signora," he said to la Zia. "He looks like a boy with a good disposition, but a strong temper. He will want judicious training by-and-by."

Lisa followed him to the vestibule, and opened the door for him.

"Tell me that you are not angry before you go," she said imploringly.

"Angry? No, no; how could I be angry? I am only sorry that you should waste so much warmth of feeling on a man whose heart belongs to some one else."

"What is she like—that some one else? Tell me that—I want to know."

"Very lovely, very good, very gentle and

tender and dear. How can I describe her? She is the only woman in the world for me."

"Shall I ever see her?"

"I think not, Si'ora. It would do no good. There is that sad secret which you and I know, but which she does not know. I could not tell her about you without making her wonder how you and I had come to be such friends; and then——"

"You do not think that I would tell her?" exclaimed Lisa, with a wounded air.

"No, no; I know you would not. Only secrets come to light, sometimes, unawares. Let the future take care of itself. Once more, good-bye."

"Once more, good-bye," she echoed, in tones of deepest melancholy.

CHAPTER VII.

“SHE WAS MORE FAIR THAN WORDS CAN SAY.”

IF Easter had been a time of happiness for Vansittart and Eve, bringing with it the revelation of mutual love, Whitsuntide was no less happy ; happier, perhaps, in its serene security, and in the familiarity of a love which seemed to have lasted for a long time.

“Only seven weeks,” exclaimed Eve, in one of their wanderings among the many cattle-tracks on Bexley Hill, no sound of life or movement in all the world around them save the hum of insects and the chime of cow bells. “To think that we have been engaged only seven weeks ! It seems a long lifetime.”

“Because you are so weary of me ?” asked Vansittart, with a lover’s fatuous smile.

“No ; because our love is so colossal. How

can it have grown so tremendous in so short a time?"

"Romeo and Juliet's love grew in a single night."

"Ah, that was in Italy—and for stage effect. I don't think much of a passion that springs up in a night, like one of those great red fungi which one sees in this wood on an October morning. I should like our love to be as strong and as deep-rooted as that old oak over there, with its grey sprawling roots cleaving the ground."

"Why, so it is; or it will be by the time we celebrate our golden wedding."

"Our golden wedding! Yes, if we go on living we must be old and grey some day. It seems hard, doesn't it? How happy those Greek gods and goddesses were, to be for ever young. It seems hard that we must change from what we are now. I cannot think of myself as an old woman, in a black silk gown and a cap. A cap!" she interjected, with ineffable disgust, and an involuntary movement of her ungloved hand to the coils of bright hair which were shining uncovered in the sun. "And you with grey hair and wrinkles! Wrinkles in *your* face! That is what

your favourite Spencer calls 'Unthinkable.' Stay"—looking at him searchingly in the merciless summer light. "Why, I declare there is just one wrinkle already. Just one perpendicular wrinkle! That means care, does it not?"

"What care can I have when I have you, except the fear of losing you?"

"Ah, you can have no such fear. I think, like Juliet, 'I should have had more cunning to be strange.' I let you see too soon that I adored you. I made myself very cheap."

"No more than the stars are cheap. We may all see them and worship them."

"But that deep perpendicular line, Jack. It must mean something. I have been reading Darwin on Expression, remember."

"Spencer—Darwin. You are getting far too learned. I liked you better in your ignorance."

"How ignorant I was"—with a long-drawn sigh—"till you began to educate me. Poor dear Mütterchen never taught us anything but the multiplication table and a little French grammar. We used to devour Scott, and Dickens, and Bulwer, and Thackeray. The books on our shelves will tell you how they have been read. They have

been done to rags with reading. They are dropping to pieces like over-boiled fowls. And we know our Shakespeare—we have learnt him by heart. We used to make our winter nights merry acting Shakesperean scenes to Nancy and the parlour-maid. They were our only audience. But, except those dear novelists and Shakespeare, we read nothing. History was a blank ; philosophy a word without meaning. You introduced me to the world of books and learned authors."

"Was I wise ? Was it not something like Satan's introduction of Eve to the apple ?"

"Wise or foolish, you gave me Darwin. And now I want to know what kind of trouble it was that made that line upon your forehead. Some foolish love affair, perhaps. You were in love—ever so much deeper in love than you are with me."

"No, my dearest. All my earlier loves were lighter than vanity—no more than Romeo's boyish passion for that poor shadow Rosaline."

"What other care, then ? You, who are so rich, can have no money cares."

"Can I not ? Imprimis, I am not rich ; and then what income I have is derived chiefly from agricultural land cut up into smallish farms, with

homesteads, and barns, and cowhouses, that seem always ready to tumble about the tenant's ears, unless I spend half the annual rent in repairs."

"Dear, picturesque old homesteads, I've no doubt."

"Eminently picturesque, but very troublesome to own."

"And did repairs—the cost of new thatch and new drainpipes—write that deep line on your brow?"

"Perhaps. Or it may be only a habit of frowning, and of trying to emulate the eagles in looking at the sun."

"Ah, you have been a wanderer in sunny lands, in Italy. And now we had better go and look for the girls."

They roamed over Bexley Hill or Blackdown during that happy Whitsuntide, favoured with weather that made these Sussex hills a paradise. It was the season of hawthorn blossom, and an undulating line of white may bushes came dancing down the hill like a bridal procession. It was the season of blue-bells; and all the woodland hollows were lakelets of azure bloom, luminous in sunlight, darkly purple in shadow;

the season of blossoming trees in cottage gardens, of the laburnum's golden rain, the acacia's perfumed whiteness, the tossing balls of the guelder rose, the mauve blossoms of wistaria glorifying the humblest walls, the small white woodbine scenting the balmy air. It was a season that seemed especially invented for youth and love; for the young foals sporting in the meadow; for the young lambs on the grassy hills; and for Eve and Vansittart.

They almost lived out of doors in this delicious weather. The four sisters were always ready to bear them company, and were always discreet enough to leave them alone for the greater part of every rambling expedition. Mr. Tivett had reappeared on the scene. He had been particularly useful in London, where he was full of information about the very best places for buying everything, from a diamond bracelet to a tooth-brush, and had insisted upon taking Eve and Lady Hartley to some of his favourite shops, and upon having a voice in a great many of their purchases. He took as much interest in Eve's trousseau as if he had been her maiden aunt.

The wedding was to be the simplest ceremonial

possible. Neither Vansittart nor Eve wished to parade their bliss before a light-minded multitude. The Homestead was not a house in which to entertain a mixed company; and Colonel Marchant was not a man to make a fuss about anything in life except his own comfort. He ordered a frock-coat, and got himself a new hat for the occasion; and the faithful Yorkshire Nancy, cook, housekeeper, and general manager, toiled for a week of industrious days in order that the house might be in faultless order, and the light collation worthy of the chosen who were invited to the wedding. There were to be no hired waiters, no stereotyped banquet from the confectioner's, only tea and coffee, champagne of a famous brand—upon this the Colonel insisted—and such cakes and biscuits and delicate sandwiches as Nancy knew well how to prepare. For bridesmaids, Eve had her four sisters, all in white frocks, and carrying big bunches of Maréchal Niel roses. Hetty and Peggy had been in ecstatic expectation of the day for a month, and full of speculation as to what manner of present the bridegroom would give them. They squabbled about this question

almost every night at bedtime, under the sloping roof of the attic which they occupied together, close to the overhanging thatch where there was such a humming and buzzing of summer insects in the June mornings.

"He is bound to give us a present," said Peggy. "It's *etiquette*"—accentuating the first syllable.

"You should say *etiquette*," reproved Hetty. "Lady Hartley lays a stress upon the *kett*."

"Don't bother about pronunciation," muttered Peggy; "one can never get on with one's talk when you're so fine-ladyfied."

"Pronunciation!" cried Hetty. "You pick up your language from Susan. No wonder Sophy is horrified at you."

"Sophy is too fine for anything. Mr. Vansittart said so yesterday when she gave herself airs at the picnic, because there were no table napkins. I wonder what the present will be! He's so rich, he's sure to give us something pretty. Suppose he gives us watches?"

A watch was the dream of Peggy's life. She thought the difference between no watch and watch was the difference between a joyless humdrum existence and a life of exquisite bliss.

"Suppose he doesn't," exclaimed her sister, contemptuously. "Did you ever hear of a bridegroom giving watches? Of course, the bridesmaids are supposed to have watches. Their fathers give them watches directly they are in their teens, unless they are hard-up, like our father. I shouldn't wonder if he were to give us diamond arrow brooches."

Hetty had seen a diamond arrow in Lady Hartley's bonnet-strings, and had conceived a passion for that form of ornament.

"What do you bet that it will be diamond arrows?"

"There's no use in betting with you. If you lose, one never gets paid."

"I don't often have any money," Peggy replied naively; and then came a knocking at the lath and plaster partition, and Sophy's sharp voice remonstrating—

"Are you children never going to leave off chattering? You are worse than the swallows in the morning."

There was one blissfullest of days for Peggy during the week before the wedding, a balmy

June morning on which Vansittart came in a dog-cart to take Eve and her youngest sister to Haslemere station, whence the train carried them through a smiling land, perfumed with bean blossoms and those fragrant spices which pine woods exhale under the summer sun, to Liss, where another dog-cart was waiting for them, and whence they drove past copse and common to Merewood, Vansittart's very own house, to which he brought his future wife on a visit of inspection—"to see if she would like any alterations," he said.

"As if any one could want to alter such a lovely house," exclaimed Peggy, who was allowed to run about and pry into every hole and corner, and open all the wardrobes and drawers, except in Mrs. Vansittart's rooms, where everything was looked at with an almost religious reverence.

There were boxes packed already in this lady's dressing-room, the note of departure already sounded.

"My mother talks of a house at Brighton," said Vansittart. "She has a good many friends settled there, and the winter climate suits her."

"I am sorry she should feel constrained to go

away," said Eve, looking ruefully round the spacious bedroom, with its three French windows opening on to a wide balcony, a room which could have swallowed up half the Homestead. "It seems as if I were turning her out. And I am sure there would have been ample room for both of us in this big house."

"So I told her, love; but English mothers don't take kindly to the idea of a joint ménage. She will come to us often as our guest, I have no doubt, but she insists upon giving up possession to you and me."

They loitered in all the lower rooms, drawing-room and anteroom, morning-room, library, billiard-room—an unpretentious country house, spread over a good deal of ground, roomy, airy, beautifully lighted, but boasting no art collections, no treasures of old books, unpretentiously furnished after the fashion of a century ago, and with only such modern additions as comfort required. The drawing-room would have appeared shabby to eyes fresh from modern drawing-rooms; but the colouring was harmonious, and the room was made beautiful by the abundance of flowers on tables, chimney-piece, and cabinets.

"I dare say you would like to refurnish this room by-and-by," said Vansittart.

"Not for worlds. I would not change one detail that can remind you of your childhood. I remember the drawing-room in Yorkshire, and how dearly I loved the sofas and easy-chairs—the glass cabinets of old blue china. It would grieve me to go back and see strange furniture in that dear old room; and I love to think that your eyes looked at these things when they were only on a level with that table"—pointing to a low table with a great bowl of roses upon it.

"Not my eyes alone, but my father's and grandfather's eyes have looked from yonder low level. I am glad you don't mind the shabby furniture. I confess to a weakness for the old sticks."

"Shabby furniture!" repeated Eve. "One would think you were going to marry a princess. Why, this house is a palace compared with the Homestead; and yet I have contrived to be happy even in the Homestead."

"Because Heaven has given you one of its choicest gifts—a happy disposition," said Vansittart. "It is that happy temperament which irradiates your beauty. It is not that tip-tilted

little nose, so slender in the bridge, so ethereal in its upward curve, nor yet those violet eyes, which make you so lovely. It is the happy soul for ever singing to itself, like the lark up yonder in the fathomless blue."

"I shouldn't think you cared for me, if you didn't talk nonsense sometimes," answered Eve, gaily; "but it *is* a privilege to be happy, isn't it? Sophy and I have had the same troubles to bear, but they have hurt her ever so much more than they hurt me. Jenny and I sometimes call her Mrs. Gummidge. I think it is because she has never left off struggling to be smart, never left off thinking that we ought to be on the same level as the county families; while Jenny and I gave up the battle at once, and confessed to each other frankly that we were poor and shabby, and the daughters of a scampish father. And so we have managed to be happy. I love to think that I am like Beatrice, and that I was born under a star that danced."

"You were born under a star that brought me good luck."

They were in the flower-garden, a delightful old garden of deep soft turf and old herbaceous

borders, a garden brimful of roses, standard roses and climbing roses and dwarf roses, arches of roses that made the blue sky beyond look bluer, alleys shaded with roses, like the vine-clad berceaux of Italy. It was a garden shut in by walls of cypress and yew, and so secluded as to make an *al fresco* drawing-room for summer habitation ; a drawing-room in which one could breakfast or dine, without fear of being espied by any one approaching the hall door.

Eve was enchanted with her new home. She poured out her confidence to him who was so soon to be her husband, with the right to know her inmost thoughts, her every impulse or fancy. It was not often that she talked of herself ; but to-day she was full of personal reminiscences, and Vansittart encouraged her innocent egotism.

“I don’t think you realize that you are playing the part of King Cophetua, and marrying a beggar-maiden,” she said. “I don’t think you can have any idea what a struggle my life has been since I was twelve years old—how that dear Nancy and I have had to scheme and manage, in order to feed four hungry girls. You remember how Hetty and Peggy giggled when you talked

about dinner. We scarcely ever had a meal which you and Lady Hartley would call dinner. We were vegetarians half our time—we abstained when it wasn't Lent. We had our Ember days all the year round. Oh, pray don't look so horrified. We had the kind of food we liked. Vegetable soups, and savoury stews, and salads, cakes and buns, bread and jam. We had meals that we all enjoyed tremendously—only we could not have asked a dropper-in to stay and lunch or dine—could we? So it was lucky people took so little notice of us."

"My darling, you were the pearls, and your neighbours were the swine."

"And then our dress. How could we be stylish or tailor-made girls when a ten-pound note once in a way was all we could extort from father for the whole flock? Ten pounds! Lady Hartley would pay as much for a bonnet as would buy gowns for all five of us. And then you bring me to this delicious old house—so spacious, so dignified, with such a settled air of wealth and comfort—and you ask if I can suggest any improvements in things which to my mind are perfect."

“My dearest, I want you to be happy, and very happy ; and to feel that this house is your house, to deal with as you please.”

“I only want to live in it, with you,” she answered shyly, “and not to disappoint you. What should I do if King Cophetua were to repent his too-generous marriage, and were to think of all the brilliant matches he might have made ? ”

“When we are settled here I will show you the girls my mother would have liked me to marry, and you will see that they are not particularly brilliant. And I do not even know if any of them would have accepted me, had I been minded to offer myself.”

“They could not have refused you. No one could. To know you is to adore you. Come, Jack, you have been talking *rodomontade* to me. It is my turn now. You are not extraordinarily handsome. I suppose, as a sober matter of fact, Mr. Sefton is handsomer. Don't wince at the sound of his name. You know I have always detested him. I doubt if you are even exceptionally clever—but you have a kind of charm—you creep into a girl's heart unawares. I pity

the woman who loved you, and whom you did not love.”

Vansittart thought of Fiordelisa. Perhaps in every man's life there comes one such ordeal as that—love cast at his feet, love worthless to him ; but true love all the same, and the most precious of all earthly feelings in the abstract.

Eve Marchant's wedding gifts were few but costly. She had no wide circle of friends and acquaintances to shower feather fans and ivory paper-knives, standard lamps and silver boxes, teapots and cream-jugs, fruit spoons and carriage clocks upon her, till she sat among her treasures, bewildered and oppressed, like Tarpeia under the rain of iron from rude warrior hands. Neighbours had stood aloof from the family at the Homestead, and could hardly come to the front with gifts in their hands, now that the slighted girl was going to marry a man of some standing in an adjoining county, and to take her place for ever among the respectabilities. The givers therefore were few, but the gifts were worthy. Mrs. Vansittart gave the pearl necklace which she had worn at her own bridal—a single string

of perfect pearls, with a diamond clasp that had been in the family for a century and a half. Lady Hartley gave her future sister-in-law a set of diamond stars worthy to blaze in the fashionable firmament on a Drawing-Room day. Sir Hubert gave a three-quarter bred mare of splendid shape and remarkable power, perfect as hack or hunter, on whose back Eve had already taken her first lessons in equitation. And for the bridegroom! His gifts were of the choicest and the best considered; jewels, toilet nécessaire, travelling bag, books innumerable. He watched for every want, anticipated every fancy.

"Pray, pray don't spoil me," cried Eve. "You make me feel so horribly selfish. You load me with gifts, and you say you are not rich. You are ruining yourself for me."

"A man can afford to ruin himself once in his life for his nearest and dearest," he answered gaily. "Besides, if I give you all you want now, I shall cure you of any incipient tendency to extravagance."

"I have no such tendency. My nose has been kept too close to the grindstone of poverty."

"Poor, pretty little nose! Happily the grindstone has not hurt it."

"And as for wants, who said I wanted Tennyson and Browning bound in vellum, or a travelling bag as big as a house? I have no wants, or they are all centred upon one object, which isn't to be bought with money. I want you and your love."

"I and my love are yours—have been yours since that night in the snowy road, when you entered into my life at a flash, like the sunlight through Newton's shutter, like Undine, like Titania."

One of the few wedding presents was embarrassing alike to bride and bridegroom, for it came from a man whom both disliked, but whom one of the two would rather not offend.

Eve's appearance in the family sitting-room just a little later than usual one morning was loudly hailed by Hetty and Peggy, who were squabbling over a small parcel which had arrived, registered and insured, by the morning post.

"It is a jeweller's box in the shape of a crescent," cried Peggy. "It must be a crescent brooch. How too utterly lovely! But it is not from Mr. Vansittart."

They called him Mr. Vansittart still, although he had begged them to call him Jack.

"It would be too awfully free and easy to call so superb a gentleman by such a vulgar name," Hetty said, when the subject came under discussion.

"I say it is from Mr. Vansittart," protested Hetty. "Who else would send her a diamond crescent?"

"How do you know it's diamonds?"

"Oh, of course. Bridegrooms always give diamonds. Did you ever see anything else in the weddings in the *Lady's Pictorial*?"

"Bother the *Lady's Pictorial*! it ain't his handwriting."

"Ain't it, stupid? Who said it was? It's the jeweller's writing, of course—with Mr. Vansittart's card inside."

"Perhaps you will allow me to open the parcel, and see what it all means," said Eve, with the eldest sister's dignity.

The two young barbarians had had the breakfast-table to themselves, Sophy and Jenny not having appeared. There were certain operations with spirit-lamp and tongs which made these

young ladies later than the unsophisticated juniors.

"I shall scold him savagely for sending me this, after what I told him yesterday," said Eve, as she tore open the carefully sealed parcel.

She was of Hetty's opinion. The gift could be from none but her lover.

"Oh, oh, oh!" they cried, all three of them, in a chorus of rapture, as the box was opened.

The crescent was of sapphires, deeply, darkly, beautifully blue, without flaw or feather. Small brilliants filled in the corners between the stones, but these hardly showed in that blue depth and darkness. The effect was of a solemn, almost mysterious splendour. It was a jewel such as Cleopatra might have worn, clasping a mantle of white and gold upon a peerless bust. It was beautiful enough for the loveliest wearer, costly enough for the greatest among royal ladies.

"Oh, how wicked, how wilful of him, to waste such a fortune upon me!" cried Eve, taking the crescent out of its white velvet bed.

Under the jewel, like the asp under the fig-leaves, there lay a visiting-card.

"From Mr. Sefton, with all best wishes."

Eve dropped the brooch as if it had stung her.

"From him?" she cried. "How horrid!"

"I call it utterly charming of him," protested Hetty, who had adopted as many of Lady Hartley's phrases as her memory would hold. "We all know that he admired you, and I think it too sweet of him to show that he bears no malice now that you are marrying somebody else. Had he sent you anything paltry—fish-knives or a scent-bottle, for instance—I should have loathed him. But such a present as this, so simple yet so *distingué*, in such perfect taste——"

"Cease your raptures, Hetty, for mercy's sake!" cried Eve, wrapping the jewel-box in the crumpled paper, and tying the string round it rather roughly. "Would you accept any gift from a man you hate?"

"It would depend upon the gift. I wouldn't advise my worst enemy to try me with a sapphire crescent—such sapphires as those!"

"You are a mighty judge of sapphires!" said Eve, contemptuously; after which unkind remark she ate her breakfast of bread and butter and home-made marmalade in moody silence.

And it was a rare thing for Eve to be silent or moody.

Vansittart's step was heard upon the gravel before the curling-tongs were done with in the upper story, and Eve ran out to the porch to meet him, with the jeweller's parcel in her hand. They walked about the garden together, between rows of blossoming peas and feathery asparagus, by borders of roses and homely pinks, talking of Sefton and his gift. Eve wanted to send it back to the giver.

"I can decline it upon the ground that I don't approve of wedding presents except from one's own and one's bridegroom's kindred," she said. "I won't be uncivil."

"I fear he would think the return of his gift uncivil, however sweetly you might word your refusal. Wedding gifts are such a customary business; it is an unheard-of act to send one back. No, Eve, I fear you must keep the thing," with a tone of disgust; "but you need not wear it."

"Wear it! I should think not! Of course I shall obey you; but I hate the idea of being under an obligation to Mr. Sefton, who—well,

who always made me feel more than any one else that I wasn't one of the elect. His friendliness was more humiliating than other people's stand-offishness. I wonder you mind offending him, Jack. I know you don't like him."

"No ; but he is my sister's neighbour ; and he and the Hartleys are by way of being friendly."

"Ah, I see ! That is a reason. I wouldn't for the world do anything to make Lady Hartley feel uncomfortable. He might go to her and tax her with having an unmannerly young woman for a sister-in-law. So I suppose I must write a pretty little formal letter to thank him for his most exquisite gift, the perfect taste of which is only equalled by his condescension in remembering such an outsider as Colonel Marchant's daughter. Something to that effect, but not quite in those words."

She broke into gay laughter, the business being settled, and lifted herself on tiptoe to offer her rosy lips to Vansittart's kiss ; and all the invisible fairies in the peaseblossom, and all the microscopic Cupids lurking among the rose leaves, beheld that innocent kiss and laughed their noiseless laugh in sympathy with these true lovers.

"I have a good mind," said Eve, as she ran back to the house, "to give Peggy the blue crescent to fasten her pinafore."

The wedding at Fernhurst Cottage was as pretty a wedding as any one need care to see, although it was a ceremony curtailed of all those surroundings which make weddings worthy to be recorded in the Society papers. There was no crowd of smart people, no assemblage of smart gowns stamped with the man mantua-maker's cachet, and marking the latest development of fashion. No long train of carriages choked the narrow rural road, or filled the little valley with clouds of summer dust. Only the kindred of bride and bridegroom were present; but even these made a gracious group in the village church, while the music of the rustic choir and the school children with their baskets of roses were enough to give a joyous and bridal aspect to the scene.

Eve, in her severely simple satin gown, with no ornaments save the string of pearls round her full firm throat, and the natural orange blossoms in her bright hair, was a vision of youthful grace and beauty that satisfied every eye, and made

the handsome bridegroom in all his height, and breadth, and manly strength, a mere accessory, hardly worth notice. The four sisters, in their gauzy white frocks and Gainsborough hats, when clustered in a group at the church door, might have suggested four cherubic heads looking out of a fleecy cloud, so fresh and bright were the young faces, in the unalloyed happiness of the occasion — happiness almost supernal, for in defiance of conventionality, and perhaps divining, or overhearing, Peggy's desire, the bridegroom had given them watches, dainty little watches, with an "E" in brilliants upon each golden back—E, for Eve; E, for Ecstasy; E, for Everlasting bliss! Peggy felt she had nothing more to ask of life. And for spectators who need have wished a friendlier audience than honest Yorkshire Nancy, and the cottagers who had seen Eve Marchant grow up in their midst, and had experienced many kindnesses from her—the cottagers whose children she had taught in the Sunday School, whose old people she had comforted on their death-beds, and for whose sake she had often stinted herself in order to take a jug of good soup, or a milk pudding, to a sick child?

Colonel Marchant made a dignified figure at the altar, in a frock-coat extorted from the reviving confidence of a tailor, who saw hope in Miss Marchant's marriage. He did all that was required of him with the grace of a man who, in a long association with scamps, had not forgotten the habits of good society. The modest collation at the Homestead was a success; for everybody was in good spirits and good appetite. Even Mrs. Vansittart was now content with a marriage which gave her son so fair and lovable a bride, content to believe that, whatever evil Harold Marchant might have done upon the earth, no shadow from his dark past need ever fall across his innocent sister's pathway.

And so in a great clash of joy bells, and in a shower of rice from girlish hands, Eve and Vansittart ran down the steep garden path to the carriage which was to take them to Haslemere, whence they were going to Salisbury, on the first stage of their journey to that rock-bound coast

"Where that great vision of the guarded mount
Looks o'er Namancos and Bayona's hold."

CHAPTER VIII.

“THE SHADOW PASSETH WHEN THE TREE SHALL
FALL.”

WHAT a happy honeymoon it was, along the porphyry walls of Western England; what joyous days that were so long and seemed so short to those two revellers in the sea, and the sunshine, and the scent of those poor wild flowers that grow on the lips of the ocean. There never was a less costly honeymoon, for the bride's tastes were simple to childishness, and the bridegroom was too deeply in love to care for anything she did not desire. To ramble on that romantic shore, staying here a few days, and there a week, all along the wild north coast, from Tintagel to St. Ives, southward then to Penzance, and Falmouth, and Fowey, was more than enough for bliss. And yet in all Eve's childish talk with her sisters of what she would do if ever she

married a rich man, the honeymoon tour in Italy had been a leading feature in her programme; but in those girlish visions beside the school-room fire the husband had been a nonentity, a mere purse-bearer, and all her talk had been of the places she was to see. Now, with this very real husband, fondly, poetically dear, all earth was paradisaic, and Penzance was not one whit less lovely than Naples. She was exquisitely happy; and what can the human mind require beyond perfect bliss?

These wedded lovers lingered long over that summer holiday. It was a glorious summer—a summer of sunshine and cloudless skies, varied only by the inevitable thunderstorm—tempest enjoyed by Vansittart and Eve, who loved Nature in her grand and awful as well as in her milder aspects—and a tempest from the heights above Boscastle, or from the grassy cliffs of the Lizard, is a spectacle to remember. They spun out the pleasures of that simple Cornish tour. There was nothing to call them home—no tie, no duty, only their own inclination; for the dowager Mrs. Vansittart was staying at Redwold, absorbed in worship of the third generation, and was to go

from Redwold to Ireland for a round of visits to the friends of her early married life. The lovers were therefore free to prolong their wanderings, and it was only when the shortening days suggested fireside pleasures that Vansittart proposed going home.

“Going home,” cried Eve; “how sweet that sounds. To think that your home is to be my home for evermore; and the servants, your old, well-trained servants, will be bobbing to me as their mistress—I who never had any servant but dear old motherly Nancy, who treats me as if I were her own flesh and blood, and an untaught chit for a parlour-maid, a girl who was always dropping knives off her tray, or smashing the crockery, in a most distracting manner. We had only the cheapest things we could buy at Whiteley’s sales, with a few relics of former splendour; and it was generally the relics that suffered. I cannot imagine myself the mistress of a fine house, with a staff of capable servants. What an insignificant creature I shall seem among them!”

“You will seem a queen—a queen out of the great kingdom of poetry—a queen like Tennyson’s Maud, in a white frock, with roses in your

hair, and an ostrich fan for a sceptre. Don't worry about the house, Eve. It will govern itself. The servants are all old servants, and have been trained by my mother, whose laws are the laws of Draco. Everything will work by machinery, and you and I can live in the same happy idleness we have tasted here."

"Can we? May we, do you think? Is it not a wicked life? We care only for ourselves; we think only of ourselves."

"Oh, we can mend that in some wise. I'll introduce you to all my cottage tenants; and you will find plenty of scope for your benevolence in helping them through their troubles and sicknesses. You can start a village reading-room; you can start—or revive—a working man's club. You shall be Lady Bountiful—a young and blooming Bountiful—not dealing in herbs and medicines, but in tea, and wine, and sago puddings, and chicken broth; finding frocks for the children, and Sunday bonnets for the mothers—flashing across poverty's threshold like a ray of sunshine."

Life that seems like a happy dream seldom

lasts very long. There is generally some kind of rough awakening. Fate comes like the servant bidden to call us of a morning, and shakes the sleeper by the shoulder. The happy dream vanishes through the ivory gate, and the waking world in all its harsh reality is there.

Eve's awakening came in a most unexpected shape. It came one October morning in the first week of her residence at Merewood. It came in a letter from the old servant Nancy, a letter in a shabby envelope, lying hidden among that heap of letters, monogrammed, coronetted, fashionable, which lay beside Mrs. Vansittart's plate when she took her seat at the breakfast table.

She left that letter for the last, not recognizing Nancy's penmanship, an article of which the faithful servant had always been sparing. Eve read all those other trivial letters—invitations, acceptances, friendly little communications of no meaning—and commented upon them to her husband as he took his breakfast—and then finally she opened Nancy's letter. It was October, and Vansittart was dressed for shooting. October, yet there was no house-party. Eve had pleaded for a little more of that dual solitude

which husband and wife had both found so delightful; and Vansittart had been nothing loth to indulge her whim. November would be time enough to invite his friends; and in the mean time they had their pine woods and copses and common all to themselves; and Eve could tramp about the covers with him when he went after his pheasants, without feeling herself in anybody's way. October had begun charmingly, with weather that was balmy and bright enough for August. They were breakfasting with windows open to the lawn and flower-beds, and the bees were buzzing among the dahlias, and the air was scented with the Dijon roses that covered the wall.

"Why, it is from Nancy," exclaimed Eve, looking at the signature. "Dear old Nancy. What can she have to write about?"

"Read, Eve, read," cried Vansittart. "I believe Nancy's letter will be more interesting than all those inanities you have been reading to me. There is sure to be some touch of originality, even if it is only in the spelling."

Eve's eyes had been hurrying over the letter while he spoke.

“Oh, Jack,” she exclaimed, in a piteous voice, “can there be any truth in this?”

The letter was as follows, in an orthography which need not be reproduced:—

“HONOURED MADAM,

“I should not take the liberty to write to you about dear Miss Peggy, only at Miss Sophy’s and Miss Jenny’s age they can’t be expected to know anything about illness, and I’m afraid they may pass things over till it’s too late to mend matters, and then I know you would blame your old servant for not having spoken out.”

“What an alarming preamble,” said Jack. “What does it all mean?”

“It means that Peggy is very ill. Peggy, who seemed the strongest of all of us.”

She went on reading the letter.

“You know what beautiful weather we had after your marriage, honoured Madam. The young ladies enjoyed being out of doors all day long, and all the evening, sometimes till bedtime. They seldom had dinner indoors. It was ‘Picnic basket, Nancy,’ every morning, and I had to make them Cornish pasties—any scraps of

meat was good enough so long as there was plenty of 'pie-crust—and fruit turnovers; and off they used to go to the copses and the hills directly after breakfast. They were all sunburnt, and they all looked so well, no one could have thought any harm would come of it. But Miss Peggy she used to run about more than her sisters, and she used to get into dreadful perspirations, as Miss Hetty told me 'afterwards, and then, standing or sitting about upon those windy hills, no doubt she got a chill. Even when she came home, with the perspiration teeming down her dear little face, she didn't like the tew of changing all her clothes, and I was too busy in the kitchen—cooking, or cleaning, or washing—to look much after the poor dear child, and so it came upon me as a surprise in the middle of August when I found what a bad cold she had got. I did all I could to cure her. You know, dear Miss Eve, that I'm a pretty good nurse—indeed, I helped to nurse your poor dear ma every winter till she went abroad—but, in spite of all my mustard poultices and hot footbaths, this cold and cough have been hanging about Miss Peggy for more than six weeks, and she

doesn't get any better. Miss Sophy sent for the doctor about a month ago, and he told her to keep the child warmly clad, and not to let her go out in an east wind, and he sent her a mixture, and he called two or three times, and then he didn't call any more. But Miss Peggy's cough is worse than it was when the doctor saw her, and the winter will be coming on soon, and I can't forget that her poor ma died of consumption: so I thought the best thing I could do was to write freely to you.—Your faithful friend and servant,

“NANCY.”

“Died of consumption!” The words came upon Vansittart like the icy hand of Death himself, taking hold of his heart.

“Is that true, Eve?” he asked. “Did your mother die of consumption?”

“I never heard exactly what her complaint was. She was far away from us when she died. I remember she always had a cough in the winter, and she had to be very careful of herself—or, at least, people told her she ought to be careful. She seemed to fade away, and I thought her grief about Harold had a good deal to do with her early death.”

“Ah, that was it, no doubt. It was grief killed her. Her son’s exile, her change of fortune, were enough to kill a sensitive woman. She died of a broken heart.”

Anything! He would believe anything rather than accept the idea of that silent impalpable enemy threatening his beloved—the horror of hereditary consumption—the shadow that walketh in noonday.

“My sweet Peggy!” cried Eve, with brimming eyes. “I have been home a week, and I have not been to see my sisters—only an hour’s journey by road and rail! It is nearly three months since I saw them, and we were never parted before in all our lives. May I go to-day—at once, Jack? I shall be miserable——”

“Till you have discovered a mare’s nest, which I hope and believe Nancy’s letter will prove,” her husband interjected soothingly. “Yes, dear, we’ll go to Haslemere by the first train that will carry us, and we’ll telegraph for a fly to take us on to Fernhurst. There shall not be a minute lost. You shall have Peggy in your arms before lunch-time. Dear young Peggy! Do you suppose she is not precious to me, as

well as to you? I promised I would be to her as a brother. Your sisters are my sisters, Eve."

He rang the bell at the beginning of his speech, and ordered the dog-cart at the end.

"We must catch the London train, at 10.15," he told the footman. "Let them bring round the cart as soon as it can be got ready. And now, dearest, your hat and jacket, and I am with you."

There was comfort in this prompt action. Eve tore upstairs, threw on the first hat she could find, too eager to ring for her maid, with whose attendance she was always willing to dispense, as an altogether novel and not always pleasant sensation. She came flying down to the hall ten minutes before the cart drove round, and she and Vansittart walked up and down in front of the porch, talking of the sisters, she breathless and with fast-beating heart, protesting more than once at the slowness of the grooms.

"My dearest, for pity's sake be calm. Why should you think the very worst, only because Nancy is an alarmist? These people are always full of ghoulisn imaginings. Peasants gloat over the idea of sickness and death. They will stab one to the heart unwittingly; they will

look at one's nearest and dearest, and say, 'Poor Miss So-and-so does not look as if she was long for this world.' Long for this world, forsooth! Thank Heaven the threatened life often outlasts the prophet's. Come, here is the cart. Jump in, Eve. The drive through the fresh air will revive your spirits."

She was certainly in better spirits by the time the cart drew up at the railway station, and in better spirits all the way to Haslemere; but it was her husband's hopefulness rather than the crisp autumnal air which revived her. Yes, she would take comfort. Jack was right. Nancy was the best of creatures, but very apt to dwell upon the darker aspects of life, and to prophesy evil.

Yes, Jack was right; for scarcely had the fly drawn up at the little gate when Peggy came dancing down the steep garden path, with outstretched arms, and wild hair flying in the wind, and legs much too long for her short petticoats, that very Peggy whom Eve's fearful imaginings had depicted stretched on a sick-bed, faint almost to speechlessness. No speechlessness about this Peggy, the real flesh and blood

Peggy, whose arms were round Eve's neck before she had begun the ascent of the pathway, whose voice was greeting her vociferously, and who talked unintermittingly, without so much as a comma, till they were in the school-room. The arms that clung so lovingly were very skinny, and the voice was somewhat hoarse; but the hoarseness was no doubt only the consequence of running fast, and the skinniness was the normal condition of a growing girl. Yes, Peggy had grown during her sister's long honeymoon. There was decidedly an inch or so more leg under the short skirts.

Eve wept aloud for very joy, as she sat on the sofa with Peggy on her lap—the dear old Yorkshire sofa—the sofa that had been a ship, an express train, a smart barouche, an opera-box, and ever so many other things, years ago, in their childish play. She could not restrain her tears as she thought of that terrible vision of a dying Peggy, and then clasped this warm, joyous, living Peggy closer and closer to her heart. The other sisters had gone to a morning service. She had this youngest all to herself for a little while.

"I don't go to church on weekdays now," said Peggy, "only on Sundays. It makes my chest ache to sit so long."

Ah, that was like the dull sudden sound of the death-bell.

"That's because you're growing so fast, Peg," said Vansittart's cheery voice. "Growing girls are apt to be weak. I shall send you some port which will soon make you sit up straight."

"You needn't trouble," said Peggy. "I could swim in port if I liked. Sir Hubert sent a lot for me—the finest old wine in his cellar—just because Lady Hartley happened to say I was growing too fast. And they have sent grapes, and game, and all sorts of delicious things from Redwold, only because I grow too fast. It's a fine thing for all of us that I grow so fast—ain't it, Eve?—for, of course, I can't eat all the grapes or the game."

Peggy looked from wife to husband, with a joyous laugh. She had red spots on her hollow cheeks, and her eyes were very bright. Vansittart heard the death-bell as he looked at her.

The sisters came trooping in, having seen the fly at the door and guessed its meaning. They

were rapturous in their greetings, had worlds to say about themselves and their neighbours, and were more eager to talk of their own experiences than to hear about Eve's Cornish wanderings.

"You should just see how the people suck up to us, now you are Lady Hartley's sister-in-law," said Hetty, and was immediately silenced for vulgarity, and to make way for her elder sisters.

Vansittart left them all clustered about Eve, and all talking together. He went out into the garden—the homely mixed garden of shrubs and fruit and flowers and vegetables, garden which now wore its autumnal aspect of over-ripeness verging on decay, rosy-red tomatoes hanging low upon the fence, with flabby yellowing leaves, vegetable marrows grown out of knowledge, and cucumbers that prophesied bitterness, cabbage stumps, withering bean-stalks—a wilderness of fennel: everywhere the growth that presages the end of all growing, and the beginning of winter's death-sleep.

It was not to muse upon decaying Nature that Vansittart had come out among the rose and carnation borders, the patches of parsley and mint. He had a purpose in his sauntering, and

made his way to the back of the straggling, irregular cottage, where the long-tiled roof of the kitchen and offices jutted out from under the thatch. Here through the open casement he saw Yorkshire Nancy bustling about in the clean, bright kitchen, her pupil and slave busy cleaning vegetables at the sink, and a shoulder of lamb slowly revolving before the ruddy coal fire—an honest, open fireplace. “None of your kitcheners for me,” Nancy was wont to say, with a scornful emphasis which recalled the fox in his condemnation of unattainable grapes.

Vansittart looked in at the window.

“May I have a few words with you, Nancy?” he asked politely.

“Lor, sir, how you did startle me to be sure. Sarah, look to lamb and put pastry to rise,” cried Nancy, whisking off her apron, and darting out to the garden. “You see, sir, you and Miss Eve have took us by surprise, and it’s as much as we shall have a bit of lunch ready for you at half-past one.”

“Never mind lunch, my good soul. A crust of bread and a morsel of cheese would be enough.”

“Oh, it won’t be quite so bad as that. Miss

Eve likes my chiss-cakes, and she shall have a matrimony cake to her afternoon tea."

"Nancy, I want a little serious talk with you," Vansittart began gravely, when they had walked a little way from the house, and were standing side by side in front of the untidy patch where the vegetable marrows had swollen to great orange-coloured gourds. "I am full of fear about Miss Peggy."

"Oh, sir, so am I, so am I," cried Nancy, bursting into tears. "I didn't want to frighten dear Miss Eve—I beg pardon, sir, I never can think of her as Mrs. Vansittart."

"Never mind, Nancy. You were saying——"

"I didn't want to frighten your sweet young lady in the midst of her happiness; but when I saw that dear child beginning to go off just like her poor mother——"

"Oh, Nancy!" cried Vansittart, despairingly, with his hand on the Yorkshirewoman's arm. "Is that a sure thing? Did Mrs. Marchant die of consumption?"

"As sure as you and I are standing here, sir. It was a slow decline, but it was consumption, and nothing else. I've heard the doctors say so."

CHAPTER IX.

“HE SAID, ‘SHE HAS A LOVELY FACE.’”

DECEMBER'S fogs covered London as with a funeral pall, and hansom and four-wheeler crept along the curb more slowly than a funeral procession. It was the winter season, the season of cattle-shows, and theatres, and middle-class suburban gaieties, and snug little dinners and luncheons in the smart world, casual meetings of birds of passage, halting for a few days between one country visit and another, or preparing for migration to sunnier skies. There were just people enough in Mayfair to make London pleasant; and there were people enough in South Kensington and Tyburnia to fill the favourite theatres to overflowing.

A new comic opera had been produced at the Apollo at the beginning of the month, and a new singer had taken the town by storm.

The opera was called *Fanchonette*. It was a story of the Regency; the Regency of Philip of Orleans and his dissipated crew; the age of red heels and lansquenets, of little suppers and deadly duels; a period altogether picturesque, profligate, and adapted to comic opera.

Fanchonette was a girl who sang in the streets; a girl born in the gutter, vulgar, audacious, irresistible, and the good genius of the piece.

Fanchonette was Fiordelisa—and Fiordelisa in her own skin; good-natured, impetuous, a creature of smiles and tears; buoyant as a seagull on the crest of a summer wave; rejoicing in her strength and her beauty as the Sun rejoiceth to run his race.

What people most admired in this new songstress was her perfect *abandon*, and that abundant power of voice which seemed strong enough to have sustained the most exacting rôle in the classic repertoire, with as little effort as the light and graceful music of opera bouffe—the power of a Malibran or a Tietjens. The music of *Fanchonette* was florid, and the part had been written up for the new singer. Manager, artists, and author had thought Mr.

Mervyn Hawberk, the composer, reckless almost to lunacy when he elected to entrust the leading part in his new opera to an untried singer; but Hawberk had made Signora Vivanti rehearse the music in his own music-room, not once, but many times, before he resolved upon this experiment; and having so resolved, he turned her over to Mr. Watling, the author of the libretto, to be coached in the acting of her part; and Mr. Watling was fain to confess that the young Venetian's vivacity and quickness of apprehension, the force and fire, the magnetism of her southern nature, made the work of dramatic education a very different thing to the weary labour of grinding his ideas into the bread and butter misses who were sometimes sent to him as aspirants for dramatic fame. This girl was so quick to learn and to perceive, and struggled so valiantly with the difficulties of a foreign language. And her Venetian accent, with its soft slurring of consonants, was so quaint and pretty. Mr. Watling took heart, and began to think that his friend and partner, Mervyn Hawberk, had some justification for his faith in this untried star.

The result fully justified Hawberk's confidence.

There were two principal ladies in the opera—the patrician heroine, written for a light soprano, and the gutter heroine, a mezzo soprano, whose music made a greater call upon the singer than the former character, which had been written especially for the Apollo's established prima donna, a lady with a charming birdlike voice, flexible and brilliant, but a little worn with six years' constant service, and a handsome face which was somewhat the worse for those six years in a London theatre. There could have been no greater contrast to Miss Emmeline Danby, with her sharp nose, blonde hair, sylph-like figure and canary-bird voice, than this daughter of St. Mark, whose splendour of colouring and fulness of form seemed in perfect harmony with the power and compass of her voice. The town, without being tired of Miss Danby, was at once caught and charmed by this new singer. Her blue-black hair and flashing eyes, her easy movements, her broken English, her gay girlish laughter, were all new to the audience of the Apollo, who hitherto had been called upon to applaud only the highest training of voice and person. Here was a girl who, like the character she represented,

had evidently sprung from the proletariat, and who came dancing on to the London stage, fresh, fearless, unsophisticated, secure of the friendly feeling of her audience, and giving full scope to her natural gaiety of heart.

Signora Vivanti's personality was a new sensation, and to a *blasé* London public there is nothing so precious as a new sensation. Signor Zinco proved a true prophet. That touch of vulgarity which he had spoken of deprecatingly to Vansittart had made Lisa's fortune. Had she come straight from the Milan Conservatorio, cultivated to the highest pitch of artistic training, approved by Verdi himself, she would hardly have succeeded as she had done, with all the rough edges of her grand voice unpolished, and all the little caprices and impertinences of a daughter of the people unchastened and unrestrained.

Lisa took the town by storm, and "Fanchonette," in her little mob cap and striped petticoat, appeared on half the match-boxes that were sold by the London tobacconists; and "Fanchonette," with every imaginable turn of head and shoulder, smiled in the windows of the Stereoscopic Company, and of all the fashionable stationers.

Among the many who admired the new singer one of the most enthusiastic was Mr. Sefton, who generally spent a week or two of the early winter in his bachelor quarters at Chelsea, for the express purpose of seeing the new productions at the fashionable theatres, and of dining with his chosen friends.

Sefton was passionately fond of music, and knew more about it than is known to most country gentlemen. The loftiest classical school was not too high or too serious for him ; and the lightest opera bouffe was not too low. He had a taste sufficiently catholic to range from Wagner to Offenbach. He was a profound believer in Sullivan, and he had a warm affection for Massenet.

Fanchonette was by far the cleverest opera which Mr. Hawberk had written ; and Sefton was at the Apollo on the opening night, charmed with the music, and infinitely amused by the new singer. He went a second, a third, a fourth time during his fortnight in town ; and the oftener he heard the music the better he liked it ; and the oftener he saw Signora Vivanti the more vividly was he impressed by her undisciplined graces of

person and manner. She had just that spontaneity which had ever exercised the strongest influence over his mind and fancy. He had passed unmoved through the furnace of the best society, had danced and flirted, and had been on the best possible terms with some of the handsomest women in London, and had yet remained heartwhole. He had never been so near falling in love in all seriousness as with Eve Marchant; and Eve's chief charm had been her frank girlishness, her unsophisticated delight in life.

Well, he was cured of his passion for Eve, cured by that cold douche of indifference which the young lady had poured upon him; cured by the feeling of angry scorn which had been evoked by her preference for Vansittart; for a man who, in worldly position, in good looks, and in culture, Wilfred Sefton regarded as his inferior. He could not go on caring for a young woman who had shown herself so utterly deficient in taste as not to prefer the dubious advances of a Sefton to the honest love of a Vansittart. He dismissed Eve from his thoughts for the time being; but not without prophetic musings upon a day when she might be wearied of her commonplace hus-

band, and more appreciative of Mr. Sefton's finer qualities of intellect and person. He was thus in a measure fancy free as he lolled in his stall at the Apollo, and listened approvingly to Lisa's full and bell-like tones in the quartette, which was already being played on all the barrel-organs in London, a quartette in which the composer had borrowed the dramatic form of the famous quartette in *Rigoletto*, and adapted it to a serio-comic situation. He was free to admire this exuberant Italian beauty, free to pursue a divinity whom he judged an easy conquest. He and the composer were old friends—Hawberk being a familiar figure at all artistic gatherings in the artistic suburb of Chelsea—and from Hawberk Mr. Sefton had heard something of the new prima donna's history. He had been told that she was a daughter of the Venetian people, a lace-maker from one of the islands; that she had come to London with her aunt, to seek her fortune; and that her musical training had been accomplished within the space of a year, under the direction of Signor Zinco, the fat little Italian who played the 'cello at the Apollo.

Such a history did not suggest inaccessible

beauty, and there was a touch of originality in it which awakened Sefton's interest. The very name of Venice has a touch of enchantment for some minds; and Sefton, although a man of the world, was not without romantic yearnings. He was always glad to escape from the beaten way of life.

He had been troubled and perplexed from the night of Signora Vivanti's *début* by the conviction that he had seen that brilliant face before, and by the inability to fix the when or the where. Yes, that vivid countenance was decidedly familiar. It was the individual and not the type which he knew—but where and when—where and when? The brain did its work in the usual unconscious way, and one night, sitting lazily in his stall, dreamily watching the scene, and the actress whose image seemed to fill the stage to the exclusion of all other figures, the memory of a past rencontre flashed suddenly upon the dreamer. The face was the face of the foreign girl he had seen on the Chelsea Embankment, hanging upon Vansittart's arm.

"By Heaven, there is something fatal in it," thought Sefton. "Are the threads always to

cross in the web of our lives? He has worsted me with Eve; and now—now am I to fall deep in love with his cast-off mistress?”

He had been quick to make inferences from that little scene on the Embankment; the girl hanging on Vansittart's arm, looking up at him pleadingly, passionately. What could such a situation mean but a love affair of the most serious kind?

Had there been any doubt in Sefton's mind as to the nature of the intrigue Vansittart's evident embarrassment would have settled the question. Mr. Sefton was the kind of man who always thinks the worst about everybody, and prejudice had predisposed him to think badly of Eve's admirer.

This idea of the singer's probable relations with Vansittart produced a strong revulsion of feeling. Sefton told himself that his affection was too good to be wasted upon any man's cast off mistress, least of all upon the leavings of a man he disliked. An element of scorn was now mixed with his admiration of the lovely Venetian. Until now he had approached her with deference, sending her a bouquet every evening, with his

card, but making no other advance. But the day after his discovery he sent her a diamond bracelet, and asked with easy assurance to be allowed to call upon her.

The bracelet was returned to him, with a stately letter signed Zinco ; a letter wherein the 'cello player begged that his pupil might be spared the annoyance of gifts, which she could but consider as insults in disguise.

This refusal stimulated Sefton to renewed ardour. He forgot everything except the rebuff, which had taken him by surprise. He put the bracelet in a drawer of his writing-table, and turned the key upon it with a smile.

“She will be wiser by-and-by,” he said to himself.

He went back to the country next day, and tried to forget Signora Vivanti's eyes, and the thrilling sweetness of her voice, tried to banish that seductive image altogether from his mind, while he devoted himself to the conquest of an untried hunter, a fine bay mare, whose pace was better than her manners, and who showed the vulgar strain in her pedigree very much as Signora Vivanti showed her peasant ancestry.

The season was not a good one, and in the face of a hard frost Sefton had nothing to do but brood upon the image that had taken possession of his fancy. It was only when he found himself amidst the tranquil surroundings of his country seat that he knew the strength of his infatuation for the singer.

He looked back upon his life as he strolled round the billiard table, cue in hand, trying a shot now and then yawningly, as the snow came softly down outside the Tudor windows, and gradually blotted out the view of garden and park. He looked back upon his life, wondering whether he had done the best for himself, starting from such an advantageous standpoint; whether, in his own careless phraseology, he had got change for his shilling.

He had always had plenty of money; he had always been his own master; he had always studied his own pleasure; and yet there had been burdens. His first love affair had turned out badly; so badly that there were people in Sussex who still gave him the cold shoulder on account of that old story. He had admired—nay, adored—a good many women since he left

Eton; but he had never seen the woman for whom he cared to sacrifice his liberty, for whose sake he could bind himself for all his life to come. He knew himself well enough to know that all his passions were short-lived, and that, however deeply he might be in love to-day, satiety might come to-morrow.

He was ambitious, and he meant to marry a woman who could bring him increase of fortune and social status. He was not to be drifted into matrimony by the caprice of the hour. Much as he had admired Eve Marchant he had never thought of marrying her. A penniless girl with a disreputable father and a bevy of half-educated sisters was no mate for him. He had allowed himself full license in admiring her, and in letting her see that he admired her; and he had wondered that she should receive that open admiration as anything less than an honour.

And then a fool had stepped in to spoil sport—a besotted fool who took this girl for his wife, careless of her surroundings, defiant of Fate, which might overtake him in the shape of a blackguard brother. He felt only contempt for Vansittart when he thought over the story.

“He might have been content with his Venetian sweetheart,” he thought. “She is ever so much handsomer than Eve, and she obviously adored him; while that kind of ménage has the convenience of being easily got rid of when a man tires of it.”

The snow lay deep on all the country round before nightfall, and Sefton went back to his nest in Chelsea on the following afternoon, and was in a stall at the Apollo in the evening. He tried to persuade himself that the music was the chief attraction.

“Your music is like a vice, Hawberk,” he told the composer, at a tea-party next day. “It takes possession of a man’s will. I go night after night to hear *Fanchonette*, though I know I am wasting my time.”

“Thanks for the doubtful compliment. *Fanchonette* is a very pretty opera, quite the best thing I have done,” replied Hawberk, easily; “and it is very well sung and acted. The singing is good all round, but Lisa Vivanti is a pearl.”

“You are enthusiastic,” said Sefton; and then smiling at the composer’s young wife, who went

everywhere with her husband, and whose province was to wear smart frocks and look pretty, "You must keep your eye upon him, Mrs. Hawberk, lest this Venetian siren should sing as fatal a song as the Lurlei."

"No fear," cried Hawberk. "Little Lisa is as straight as an arrow and as good as gold. She lives as quietly as a nun, with a comfortable dragon in the shape of an aunt. She would hardly look at a ripping diamond bracelet which some cad sent her the other day. She just tossed bracelet and letter over to her old singing master, and told him to send it back to the giver. She has no greed of gain, no desire for carriages and horses and fine raiment. She comes to the theatre in a shabby little black frock, and she lives like a peasant on a third floor in this neighbourhood."

"That will not last," said Sefton. "Your *rara avis* will soon realize her own value. The management will be called upon to provide her with a stable and a chef, and diamonds will be accepted freely as fitting tribute to her talents."

"I don't believe it. I think she is a genuine, honest, right-minded young woman, and that she

will gang her own gait in spite of all counter influences. There may have been some love affair in the past that has sobered her. I think there has been ; for there is a little boy who calls her mother, and for whom she takes no trouble to account. I will vouch for my little Lisa, and I have allowed Mrs. Hawberk to go and see her."

"She is quite too sweet," assented the lady ; "so naive, so frank, so fresh, so child-like."

"Upon my honour," said Hawberk, as his wife fluttered away and was absorbed in a group of acquaintances, "I believe Vivanti is a good woman, in spite of the little peccadillo in a serge frock and sailor collar."

"I am very glad to hear it, for I want you to introduce me to the lady."

"Oh, but really now that is just what I don't care about doing. She is keeping herself to herself, and is working conscientiously at her musical education. She is a very busy woman, and she has no idea of society, or its ways and manners. What can she want with such an acquaintance as you ? "

"Nothing ; but I very much want to know her ; and I pledge myself to approach her with

all the respect due to the best woman in England."

"To approach her, yes; I can believe that. No doubt Lucifer approached Eve with all possible courtesy; yet the acquaintance ended badly. I don't see that any good could arise from your acquaintance with my charming Venetian."

"I understand," said Sefton, with an aggrieved air; "she is so charming that you would like to keep her all to yourself."

"Oh, come now, that's a very weak thing in the way of sneers," exclaimed the composer. "I hope I am secure from any insinuations of that sort. Look here, Sefton, I'm just a bit afraid of you; but if you promise to act on the square I'll get my wife to send you a card for a Sunday evening, at which I believe she is going to get Vivanti to sing for her. That is always the first thing Lavinia thinks of if I venture to introduce her to a singer."

"That would be very friendly of you, and I promise to act on the square. I am not a married man, and I am my own master. If I were desperately in love——"

“You wouldn’t marry a Venetian lace-maker, with a damaged reputation. I know you too well to believe you capable of that sort of thing.”

“Nobody knows of what a man is capable; least of all the man himself,” said Sefton, sententiously.

Mr. and Mrs. Hawberk lived in a smart little house in that dainty and artistic region of Cheyne Walk, which even yet retains a faint flavour of Don Saltero, of Bolingbroke and Walpole, of Chelsea buns and Chelsea china, Ranelagh routs, and Thames watermen. Mr. Hawberk’s house was in a terrace at right angles with the Embankment, but further west than Tite Street. It was a new house, with all the latest improvements, and all the latest fads, tiny panes to Queen Anne windows—admitting the minimum of light and not overmuch air; a spacious ingle nook in a miniature dining-room, whereby facetious friends had frequently been heard to ask Mrs. Hawberk which was the ingle nook and which was the dining-room.

The house was quaint and pretty, and being entirely furnished with Japaneseries was a very

fascinating toy, if not altogether the most commodious thing in the way of houses. For party-giving it was delightful, for less than a hundred people choked every inch of space in rooms and staircase, and suggested a tremendous reception: so that the smallest of Mrs. Hawberk's parties seemed a crush.

Sefton arriving at half-past ten, only half an hour after the time on Mrs. Hawberk's card, found the drawing-rooms blocked with people, mostly standing, and could see no more of Signora Vivanti than if she had been on the other side of the river; but the people in the doorway were talking about her, and their talk informed him that she was somewhere in the innermost angle of the back drawing-room, behind the grand piano, and that she was going to sing.

Then there came an authoritative "Silence, please," from Hawberk, followed by a sudden hush as of sentences broken off in the middle, and anon a firm hand played the symphony to Sullivan's *Orpheus*, and the grand mezzo soprano voice rolled out the grand Shakesperean words set to exquisite music. The choice of the song was a delicate compliment to Hawberk's

master in art, who was among Mrs. Hawberk's guests.

The Venetian accent was still present in Lisa's pronunciation, but her English had improved as much as her vocalization, under Hawberk's training. He had taken extraordinary pains with this particular song, and every note rang out clear as crystal, pure as thrice-refined gold. Sir Arthur's "Brava, bravissima!" was heard amidst the applause that followed the song.

Sefton elbowed his way through the crowd—as politely as was consistent with a determination to reach a given point—and contrived to mingle with the group about the singer. She was standing by the piano in a careless attitude, dressed in a black velvet gown, which set off the yellowish whiteness of her shoulders and full round throat. Clasped round that statuesque throat, she wore a collet necklace of diamonds, splendid in size and colour, a necklace which could not have been bought for less than six or seven hundred pounds.

"So," thought Sefton. "Those diamonds don't quite come into Hawberk's notion of the lady's moral character."

Mr. Sefton did not know that, after the manner of Venetian women, Lisa looked upon jewellery as the best investment for her capital, and that almost the whole of her professional earnings since her *début* were represented by the diamonds she wore round her neck. She and la Zia were able to live on so little, and it was such a pleasure to them to save, first to gloat over the golden sovereigns, and then to change them into precious stones. There was such a delightful feeling in being able to wear one's fortune round one's neck.

Mr. Hawberk had accompanied the singer, and he was still sitting at the piano, when Sefton's eager face reminded him of his promise.

“Signora, allow me to introduce another of your English admirers. Mr. Sefton, a connoisseur in the way of music, and a cosmopolitan in the way of speech.”

Lisa turned smilingly to the stranger. “You speak Italian,” she said in her own language, and Sefton replying in very good Tuscan, they were soon on easy terms; and presently he had the delight of taking her down to the supper-room, where there was a long narrow table

loaded with delicacies, and a perpetual flow of champagne.

Lisa enjoyed herself here as frankly as she had enjoyed herself at the sign of the Black Hat, in the Piazza di San Marco. She was the same unsophisticated Lisa still, in the matter of quails and lobster mayonnaise, creams and jellies. She stood at the table and eat all the good things that Sefton brought her, and drank three or four glasses of champagne with jovial unconcern, and talked of the people and the gowns they were wearing in her soft southern tongue, secure of not being understood, though Sefton warned her occasionally that there might be other people in the room besides themselves who knew the language of Dante and Boccaccio.

Never had he talked to any beautiful woman who was so thoroughly unsophisticated; and that somewhat plebeian nature had a curious charm for him. He could understand Vansittart's infatuation for such a woman, but could not understand his giving her up for the sake of Eve Marchant, whose charms as compared with Lisa's were

“As moonlight unto sunlight, or as water unto wine.”

He hoped to discover all the history of that intrigue by-and-by, seeing how freely Lisa talked of herself to an acquaintance of an hour. He meant to follow up that acquaintance with all the earnestness of which he was capable.

"There are no finer diamonds in the room than your necklace," he said, when she had been praising an ancient dowager's jewels, gems whose beauty was not enhanced by a neck that looked as if its bony structure had been covered with one of the family parchments.

"Do you really like them?" asked Lisa, with a flashing smile.

"She doesn't even blush for her spoil," thought Sefton.

"I'm so glad you think them good," continued Lisa. "They are all my fortune. The jeweller told me I should never repent buying them."

"What, Signora, did you buy them? I thought they were the offering of some devoted admirer."

"Do you suppose I would accept such a gift from any one except—except somebody I cared for?" she exclaimed indignantly. "A man sent me a diamond bracelet one night at the

theatre—I found it in my dressing-room when I arrived—with his card. I sent it back next morning—or at least Zinco sent it back for me.”

“And I dare say you have even forgotten the man’s name?” said Sefton.

“Yes. Your English names are very ugly, and very difficult to remember. They are so short; so insignificant.”

And then she told him the history of her diamonds; how the manager of the Apollo had first doubled, and then trebled, and then quadrupled her salary; how she had kept the money in her trunk, all in gold, sovereigns upon sovereigns, and how she and her aunt had counted the gold every week, and how only last Saturday she and la Zia had gone off in a cab to Piccadilly, with a bag full of gold, and had bought the diamonds, which were now shining on Fiordelisa’s throat.

“We had less than half the price of the necklace,” concluded Lisa, “but when the jeweller heard who I was, he insisted that I should take it away with me, and pay him by degrees, just as I find convenient, so I shall pay him my salary every Saturday until I am out of debt.”

"It sounds like a fairy tale," said Sefton. "Do you and your aunt live upon rose leaves and dew, Signora ; or how is that you can afford to invest all your earnings in diamonds?"

"Oh, we have other money," answered Lisa, with a defiant glance at the questioner. "I need not sing unless I like."

"Indeed!" exclaimed Sefton, strengthened in his conviction that Signora Vivanti was not altogether so "straight" as Hawberk believed, or affected to believe.

Mr. Sefton was not so confiding as the composer. He was a man prone to think badly of women, and he was inclined to think the worst of this brilliant Venetian, much as he admired her. He followed her like a shadow for the rest of the evening, escorted her up the narrow staircase, and stood near the piano while she sang, and then took her from the stifling atmosphere of the lamp-lit house to the semi-darkness of the garden, which Mrs. Hawberk had converted into a tent, shutting out the wintry sky, and enclosing the miniature lawn and surrounding shrubbery ; a tent dimly lighted with fairy lamps, nestling among the foliage. Here he sat talking with

Lisa in a shadowy corner, while three or four other couples murmured and whispered in other nooks and corners, and while Hawberk, feeling he had done his duty as host, smoked and drank whisky and soda with a little group of chosen friends—an actor, a journalist, a playwright, and a brace of musical critics, who had an inexhaustible flow of speech, and a delicious unconsciousness of time.

Sefton too was unconscious of time, talking with Lisa in that soft Italian tongue, having to bend his head very near the full red lips in order to catch the Venetian elisions, the gentle, sliding syllables.

The hum of voices, the occasional ripples of laughter, the music and song, dwindled and died into silence—even the lights in the lower windows grew dim, and gradually Sefton awakened to the fact that the party was at an end, and that he and Signora Vivanti, and Hawberk's Bohemian group yonder, were all that remained of Mrs. Hawberk's musical evening. He bent down to look at his watch by one of the fairy lamps.

Three o'clock.

"By Jove, we are sitting out everybody else," he said, with a pleased laugh, triumphant at the thought that he had been able to amuse and interest his companion. "Three o'clock. Very late for a musical evening. You did not know it was so late, did you, Signora?"

"No," answered Lisa, carelessly; "but I don't mind. I've been enjoying myself."

"So have I; but it's rather rough on Mrs. Hawberk, who may want to rest from her labours."

"I am quite ready to go home as soon as I get my shawl," said Lisa, rising from the low wicker chair, straight as a dart, her neck and shoulders and long bare arms looking like marble in the faint glimmer of the toy lamps. Sefton stood and looked at her, drinking in her loveliness as if it had been a draught of wine from an enchanted cup. Oh, the charm of those Italian eyes; so brilliant, yet so soft; so darkly deep! Could there be any magic in fairyland more potent than the spell this Calypso was weaving round him?

"May I call your carriage?" he asked.

"I have no carriage. I live close by."

"Let me see you home, then."

She shrugged her shoulders with a gesture

which meant that the thing wasn't worth disputing about, and Sefton followed her across the little bit of grass to the house door. Hawberk stopped her on her way.

"What, my Vivanti not gone yet!" he cried. "I would have had another song out of you if I had known you were there. What have you and Mr. Sefton found to say to each other all this time?"

"We have found plenty to say. He has been talking Italian, which none of you stupid others can talk. It is a treat to hear my own language from some one besides la Zia. Good night, Signor. Shall I find la Signora to wish her good night?"

"No, child. La Signora Hawberkini retired to rest an hour ago, when all the respectable people had gone. She did not wait to see the last of such night birds as you and Sefton, and these disreputable journalists here."

"I love the night," said Lisa, in no wise abashed. "It is ever so much nicer than day."

The servants had vanished, but she found her wrap lying on a sofa—an old red silk shawl, a Bellaggio shawl, whose dinginess went ill with

her velvet gown and diamond necklace; but she wrapped it about her head and shoulders, nothing caring, and she looked a real Italian peasant as she turned to Sefton in the light of the hall lamps. He admired her even more at this moment than he had admired her before—he liked to think of her as a peasant; with no womanly sensitiveness to suffer, no pride to be wounded; divided from him socially by a great gulf of difference; and so much the more surely, and so much the more lightly to be won.

They went out into the street together. It was moonlight, a February moon, cold, and sharp, and clear, with a hoar frost whitening the wintry shrubs and iron railings. Lisa caught up her velvet train, and tripped lightly along the pavement in bronze beaded slippers and bright red stockings, Sefton at her side. She would not take his arm, both hands being occupied, one clutching the silk shawl, the other holding up her skirt. The walk was of the shortest, for Saltero's Mansion was only just round the corner; nor could Sefton detain her on the doorstep for any sentimentality about the moonlit river. She had her key in the door in a moment, and as he pushed the big, heavy

door open for her, she vanished behind it with briefest "*Grazie, e buona notte, caro Signor.*"

There had not been time for the gentlest pressure of her strong, broad hand, or for his tender "*Addio, bellissima mia,*" to be heard.

But to know where she lived was something gained, and as he walked homeward humming "*la donna è mobile,*" he meant to follow up that advantage. He had told her that he was her near neighbour. He had gone even further, and had asked her if she would sing for him at a little tea-party, were he to give one in her honour; on which she had only laughed, and said that she had never heard of a man giving a tea-party.

The acquaintance begun so auspiciously gave Wilfred Sefton a new zest for London life. He hailed the hardening frosts of February with absolute pleasure, he for whom that month had hitherto been the cream of the hunting season. He cared nothing that his latest acquisitions, the hunters in whose perfections he still believed, whose vices he had not had time to discover, were eating their heads off in his Sussex stables. He was in his stall at the Apollo every night; and Lisa's singing and Lisa's beauty, and the "quips

and cranks and wanton wiles” which constituted Lisa’s idea of acting, were enough for his contentment.

He waited till Wednesday before he ventured to call upon his divinity. He would gladly have presented himself at her door on Monday afternoon; but he did not want to appear too eager. Tuesday seemed a long blank day to his impatience, although there was plenty to do in London for a man of intellect and taste; pictures, people, politics, all manner of interests and amusements.

Lisa had told him about the aunt who lived with her and kept house for her. There could be no shadow of impropriety in his visit. He made up his mind indeed to ask for the elder lady in the first instance; but all uncertainty was saved him, as it was *la Zia* who opened the door. Those diamonds of Lisa’s could not have been earned so speedily had the Venetians taken upon themselves the maintenance of a servant. What was she there for, argued *la Zia*, when Hawberk suggested the necessity of a parlour-maid, except to sweep and dust, and market and cook? An English servant, who would want

butcher's meat every day, and would object to the cuisine *à l'huile*, would be an altogether ruinous institution.

La Zia was not too tidy in her indoor apparel, since her love for finery was stronger than her sense of the fitness of things. She had one gown at a time, a gown of silk or plush or velveteen, which she wore as a best gown till it began to be shabby or dilapidated, when Lisa bought her another fine gown, and the old one was taken for daily use.

Lisa's taste had become somewhat chastened since she had lived at Chelsea. A casual word or two from Vansittart, whose lightest speech she remembered, had made her scrupulously plain in her attire—save on such an occasion as Mrs. Hawberk's party, when her innate love of finery showed itself in scarlet stockings and beaded shoes. This afternoon Sefton found her sitting on the hearthrug in front of the bright little tiled grate, in the black stuff gown she had worn when he first saw her, and with just the same touch of colour at her throat, and in her blue-black hair.

She and the little boy were sitting on the rug

together, dividing the caprices of a white kitten, the plaything of mother and son, mother and son laughing gaily, with laughter which mingled and harmonized in perfect music. The boy made no change in his sprawling attitude as Sefton entered; but he looked up at the stranger with large dark eyes, wondering, and slightly resentful.

"*His* boy," thought Sefton, and felt a malignant disposition to kick the sprawling imp, hanging on to the mother's skirts, and preventing her from rising to greet her visitor.

"Let go, Paolo," said Lisa, laughing. "What with you and the kitten, I can't stir."

She shook herself free, transferred the kitten to the boy's eager arms, rose, and gave Sefton her hand, with a careless grace which was charming to contemplate from an artistic point of view, but which showed him how faint an impression all their talk and intimacy of Sunday night had made upon her. A woman who had thought of him in the interval would have blushed and been startled at his coming. Lisa took his visit much too easily. There was neither surprise nor gladness in her greeting.

"I saw you in the stalls," she said, "last night,

and the night before. Aren't you tired of *Fanchonette*?"

"Not in the least."

"You must be monstrously fond of music," she said, always in Italian.

"I am—monstrously; but I have other reasons for liking *Fanchonette*. I like to see you act, as well as hear you sing."

"So do other people," she answered, with frank vanity, tossing up her head. "They all applaud me when I first come on, before I have sung a note. I have to stand there in front of the lights for ever so long, while they go on applauding like mad. And yet people say you English have no enthusiasm, that you care very little for anything."

"We care a great deal for that which is really beautiful; but most of all when it is fresh and new."

"Ah! that's what Mr. Hawberk says—I am all the better because I am not highly trained like other singers. My ignorance is my strength."

"But she has worked," interposed la Zia; "ah! how hard she has worked! At her piano; at the English language. She has such a strong will.

She has but to make up her mind, and the thing is done."

"One can read as much, Signora, in those flashing eyes; in that square brow and firmly moulded chin," said Sefton, putting down his hat and cane, and establishing himself in one of the prettily draped basket-chairs. "And pray how did it happen that you two ladies made up your minds to seek your fortunes in London?"

"It was the impresario who brought us. We were at Milan, and we came to London to sing in the chorus at Covent Garden. It was good fortune which brought us so far from home."

"And you hate London, no doubt, after Italy?"

"No, indeed, Signor. London is a city to love—the wide, wide streets; the big, big houses; the great squares—ah! the Piazza is nothing to your squares—and the shops, the beautiful shops! Your sky is often gloomy, but there are summer days—heavenly days—when the wind blows down to the sea, and sweeps all the darkness out of the heavens, and your sky grows blue, like Italy. Those are days to remember."

"True! They are rare enough to be counted on the fingers of one hand," answered Sefton,

stooping to take hold of the boy, who had been pursuing his kitten on all-fours, and had this moment plunged between Sefton's legs to extract the animated ball of white fluff from under his chair. He felt nothing but aversion for the handsome, dark-eyed brat; but he felt that he must take some notice of the creature, if he wanted to stand well with the mother.

“Che sta facendo, padroncino?”

The boy was friendly, and explained himself in a torrent of broken speech. The cat was a bad cat, and wouldn't stay with him. Would the Signor make him stay? Sefton had to stoop and risk a scratching from the tiny claws, in a vain endeavour to get hold of the rebellious beast, which rolled away from him, hissing and spitting, and finally rushed across the room and took refuge behind the piano. Sefton lifted the boy on to his knee, and produced his watch, that unfailing object of interest to infancy, usually denominated, on the principle of all slang nomenclature, “tick-tick.” Once interested in the opening and shutting of the “tick-tick,” Paolo sat on the visitor's knee, *comme un image*, and allowed Sefton to talk to Lisa and her aunt.

He was careful to make himself agreeable to the elder lady, who was charmed to find an Englishman who understood her native tongue. She had contrived to learn a little English, but had made no such progress as her niece, and it was a labour to her to talk. What a pleasure, therefore, to find this suave, handsome Englishman, with his courtly manners, quick comprehension, and ready replies.

From la Zia he heard a good deal about Lisa's early life; yet there was a certain wise reticence even on that loquacious lady's part. She breathed no word of Lisa's Englishman, the first Mr. Smith, or of the second. In all her talk of their old life, in Venice, at Milan, there was no hint of any one but themselves. They appeared to have been alone, unprotected, dependent on their own small earnings.

After waiting in vain for any allusion to Vansittart, Mr. Sefton came straight to the point, with a direct question.

"I think you know a friend of mine, Signora," he said to Lisa. "Mr. Vansittart?"

"Vansittart?"

Lisa repeated the name slowly, with a look of blank wonder.

"Have you never heard that name before?"

"Never."

"So," thought Sefton, "she knew him under an alias. That means a good deal, and confirms my original idea."

He put the boy off his knee almost roughly, and rose to take his leave.

"Good-bye, Signora. You will let me drop in again some day, I hope?"

"If you like. Why did you think I knew your friend, Mr. Van—sit—tart?"

"Because last spring I saw you in Cheyne Walk talking to a man whom I took for Vansittart. A tall man, with fair hair. You seemed very friendly with him; your hands were clasped upon his arm; you were smiling up at him."

This time Lisa blushed a deep carnation, and her face saddened.

"Oh, that," she stammered—"that was some one I knew in Italy."

"Not Vansittart?"

"No."

"But the gentleman has a name of some kind," persisted Sefton.

"Never mind his name," she answered

abruptly. "I don't want to talk about him. I may never see him again, perhaps." And then, brushing away a tear, and becoming suddenly frivolous, she asked, "How did you come to remember me—after so long?"

"Because that moment by the river yonder has lived in my memory ever since—because no man can forget the loveliest face he ever saw in his life."

With that compliment, and with a lingering clasp of the strong hand, he concluded his first visit to Saltero's Mansion, la Zia accompanying him to the door and curtsying him out.

CHAPTER X.

PEGGY'S CHANCE.

IF there were blue skies now and then in a London February, what was February along the Riviera, but the most exquisite spring-time? And perhaps on all that favoured shore, Cannes has the richest firstfruits of the fertile year, for it is then that the mimosas are in their glory, and the hill of Californie is a kind of yellow fairy-land, an enchanted region, where all the trees drop golden rain.

Eve and her lover husband were at Cannes. Delicious as the place was at this season, and new as the shores of the Mediterranean were to Eve, she and her husband had not come there for their own pleasure. They had come at the advice of the doctors—to give Peggy a chance. That was what it had come to. Peggy's only

chance of living through the winter was to be found in the south. One doctor had suggested Capri, another Sorrento; but for some unexplained reason Vansittart objected to Italy, and then Mentone or Cannes had been talked about; and finally Cannes was decided upon, for medical reasons, in order that Peggy might have the watchful care of Dr. Bright, which might give her an additional chance in the hand-to-hand struggle with her grim adversary.

Vansittart had offered, in the first instance, to send Peggy to the south in the care of one of her elder sisters and an experienced travelling-maid, to be chosen especially for the invalid's comfort; but Eve had been so distressed at the idea of parting with the ailing child, so fearful lest she should not be properly nursed, or lest she should droop and die of home-sickness, that of his own accord he had offered to accompany this youngest sister-in-law on the journey, that was to give her a chance—alas! only a chance. None of the doctors talked of cure as a certainty. Peggy's family history was bad; and Peggy's lungs were seriously affected.

It was almost inevitable that the youngest

child—born after the mother's health had begun to fail—should inherit the mother's fatal tendency to lung disease; but things were altogether different in the case of Eve, the eldest daughter, born before her mother had begun to develop lung trouble. For Eve there was every chance. This was what a distinguished specialist told Vansittart, when he asked piteously if the hereditary disease shown too clearly by Peggy, were likely to appear by-and-by in Eve's constitution. He was obliged to take what comfort he could from this assurance. He would not alarm Eve by suggesting that her chest should be sounded by the physician who had just passed sentence upon her sister. Perhaps he did not want to learn too much. He was content to see his young wife fair and blooming, with all the indications of perfect health, and to believe that she must needs be exempt from inherited evil.

She was enraptured when he offered to take her to the south with Peggy.

"You are more than good, you are adorable," she cried. "Now I feel justified in having worshipped you. What, you will leave Hampshire just when the hunting is at its best? You

will forego all your plans for the spring? And you will put up with a sick child's company?"

"I shall have my wife's company, and that is enough. I shall see you happy and at ease, and not wearing yourself to death with anxieties and apprehensions about Peggy."

"Yes, I shall be ever so much happier with her, should things come to the worst"—her eyes brimmed over with sudden tears at the thought—"it will be so much to be with her—to know that we have made her quite happy."

They went to Haslemere next morning, and there was a grand scene with Peggy, who screamed with rapture on hearing that Eve and Jack were going to take her to Cannes their very own selves. She, who fancied she had lost Eve for ever, was to live with her, to sleep in the next room to her, to see her every day and all day long.

Then came the journey—the long, long journey, which made Eve and Peggy open wondering eyes at the width of France from sea to sea. They travelled with all those luxuries which modern civilization provides for the traveller who is willing to pay for them. And

every detail of the journey was a new surprise and a new joy for Peggy, who brought upon herself more than one bad fit of coughing by her absolute ecstasy. The luncheon and dinner on board the rushing *Rapide*; the comfortable *wagon-lit* to retire to at Lyons, when darkness had fallen over the eternal monotony of the landscape—and anon the surprise of awaking at midnight in a large bright room where two small beds were veiled like brides in white net curtains, and where a delightful wood fire blazed on a wide open hearth, such as Peggy only knew of in fairy tales.

How comforting was the basin of hot soup which Peggy sipped, squatting beside this cavernous chimney, while Benson, the courier-maid, skilled in nursing invalids, who had been engaged chiefly to wait upon Peggy, unpacked the Gladstone bag, and made everything comfortable for the night. Peggy had slept fitfully all the way from Lyons, hearing as in a dream the porters shouting “Avignon,” at a place where they stopped in the winter darkness, and faintly remembering having heard of a city where Popes lived and tortured people once upon a time.

She woke now and again in her white-curtained bed at Marseilles; for however happy her days might be her nights were generally restless and troubled. The new maid was very attentive to her, and gave her lemonade when her throat was parched, but the maid was able to sleep soundly between whiles, when Peggy was lying awake gazing through the white net curtains, and half expecting Robin Goodfellow to come creeping out of the wide black chimney, where the last red glow had faded from the heap of pale grey ashes on the hearth.

Towards morning Peggy fell into a refreshing slumber, and when she opened her eyes again the room was full of sunshine, and there was a band playing the "Faust Waltz" in the public gardens below.

"Why, it's summer!" cried Peggy, clapping her hands, and leaping out of the parted white curtains, and rushing to the open window.

The maid was dressed, and Peggy's breakfast was ready for her. "Oh, such delicious coffee!" she told Eve afterwards, "in a sweet little copper pot, and rolls such as were never made in hum-drum England."

Yes, it was summer, the February summer of that lovely shore. The Vansittarts stayed nearly a week at Marseilles, to rest Peggy after her forty-eight hours' journey; and to see the Votive Church on the hill, and that famous dungeon on the rock which owes more of its renown to fiction than to fact; and the parting of the ways where the ships sail east and west, to Orient or Afric, the two wonder-worlds for the untravelled European. Eve and Peggy looked longingly at the great steamers vanishing on the horizon, hardly knowing whether, if the choice were put to them, they would go right or left—to the country where the Great Moguls, the jewelled temples, the tiger hunts, the palanquins, the tame elephants with castles on their backs are to be found; or to the country where the Moors live, and where modern civilization camps gipsy-fashion among the vestiges of earth's most ancient people.

“Where would you like to go best, India or Africa?” asked Eve, as she and Peggy sat side by side in a fairy-like yawl, that went dipping and dancing over those summer waves, and seemed like a toy boat as it sailed

under the lee of an Orient steamer bound for Alexandria.

"Oh, I think I would rather go up a pyramid than anything," gasped Peggy, breathless at the mere thought. "Don't you remember 'Belzoni's Travels,' that tattered little old book which once was mother's, and how they used to grope about, Belzoni and his people, and lose themselves in dark passages, and make discoveries inside the Pyramids? And then the Nile, and the crocodiles, which one could always run away from, because they can't turn, don't you know? Oh, I think Egypt must be best of all."

Peggy and her companions were out driving along the Corniche road or sailing over the blue waters every day, and all day long; and the invalid made a most wonderful recovery during that week.

Her nights were ever so much quieter, her appetite had improved. Peggy's chance began to look like a certainty, and hope revived in Eve's breast. Hope had never died there. She could not believe that this bright, happy young creature was to be taken away from her. There was such vitality in Peggy, such vigour in those

thin arms when they clasped themselves round Eve's neck, such light and life in the full blue eyes when they looked out upon the movement and variety of the Rue Cannabière, or the bustle of the quays.

They went on to Cannes, and alighted first at one of the most comfortable hotels in Europe, the Mont Fleuri, so as to take their time in the selection of a home; for they meant to stay in Provence till there was an end of cold weather in England, to go back only when an English spring should have done its worst, and the footsteps of summer should be at hand. If Cannes should grow too warm, there was Grasse; and there were cool retreats perched still higher on the mountain slopes, where they might spend the last month or so of their sojourn. There were reasons why Eve would be glad to escape from the little world in which she was known, reasons why she should prefer the absolute retirement of a villa in a strange land, where she need receive no more visitors than she chose, where she might let it be known among the little community of British residents that she did not desire to be called upon.

They found just the retreat that suited them, high on the fair hill, which at this season was cloaked with the mimosa's golden bloom as with a royal garment. The villa stood on higher ground than the Hotel Californie, and all the gulf of San Juan lay at its feet, and the ships at anchor looked like toy ships in the distance of that steep descent, where palm and pine, cypress and olive, lent their varying form and colour to the rough grey rocks, and where garden below garden spread a carpet of vivid flowers, hedges of roses, beds of pale pink and deep purple anemones, the scarlet and orange of the ranunculus, amidst the gloom of rocky gorge and pine forest.

Beyond the gulf rose the islands, shadowy at eventide, clear and sunlit in those early mornings when Peggy watched the red fires of dawn lighting up far away yonder towards Italy. She shared Eve's vivid imaginings about that neighbouring country, and thought with wonder of being so near the border of that mystical land. All her ideas of Italy were derived from "Childe Harold," the more famous passages of which she had read and learnt diligently under Eve's instruction, the eldest daughter carrying on the

education of the youngest in a casual way, after the homely governess had vanished from the scene.

The villa was a small house, flung down carelessly, as it seemed, in a spacious garden, a garden which had been neglected of late years, since much smarter villas had risen up, white and ornamental, upon the heights of Californie. But the garden had once been cared for. It was full of roses and ivy-leaved geranium, anemones and narcissi, and, what pleased Peggy most of all, there was a grove of orange trees, where she could lie upon the grass and let the mandarin oranges drop into her lap. Eve and her young sister sat in this orange orchard for hours at a stretch, Eve working at one of those tiny garments which it was her delight to make—"dressing dolls," Vansittart called it; Peggy pretending to read, but for the most part gazing at sky or sea, watching the white clouds or the white ships sailing by in the blue.

"Don't you think heaven must be very like this?" Peggy asked, one sunshiny noontide, when the sky was of its deepest sapphire, and the balmy air had the warmth and perfume of an English midsummer.

“What, Peg, do you suppose there are orange trees in the ‘Land of the Leal’—orange trees, and smart villas, and afternoon parties?”

“No, no—only the blue sky, and the sea, and the hills jutting out, one beyond another, till they melt into the sky. It looks as if one could never come to the end of it all. It looks just like heaven.”

“Endless, and without limits, like Eternity,” said Vansittart, smiling at her, unconscious that Eve’s head was bent lower and lower over her work to hide the streaming tears. “A pretty fancy. But that boundless-seeming sea is only a big round pool after all; and think how clever it was of Columbus to find his way out of that mill-pond, and across the great ocean, and what triumph for Cortez to discover a second ocean, bigger than the first. And yet this earth of ours is only a round ball, a speck in the infinite.”

“Don’t,” cried Peggy, with her fingers in her ears. “You make my head ache. I can’t bear to think of the universe; it’s too big. Mütterchen used to tell me about it when I was a small child. She made me dream bad dreams. Why isn’t there one nice, comfortable world for us to live

in, and one lovely heaven for us to go to after we are dead, and one horrid hell for the *very* bad people, just to prevent their mixing with the good ones? That's what the Bible means, doesn't it? I can't bear to think of anything more than that."

"Don't think, darling," said Eve, sitting down on the grass beside her, and drawing the fragile form close against her own—"don't think. Only be happy. Breathe this delicious air, bask in this delightful sun, be happy, and get well."

"Oh, I am getting well as fast as ever I can. Except for my tiresome cough, I am as well as anybody can be. I wonder what they are doing at Fernhurst. Skating on Farmer Green's pond, perhaps, or crouching over the fire. You know how Hetty would always sit with her head hanging over the coals, in spite of all you could say about spoiling her complexion. And here we spoil our complexions in the sun. Isn't it wonderful?"

"Everything in our lives is wonderful, Peggy. Most of all, that I should have such a husband as Jack."

Eve held out her hand to that model husband,

smiling at him, with eyes that were veiled in tears, more grateful for his goodness to this ailing child than for all the love that he had lavished upon herself.

What a happy season this would have been in the lovely land beside the tideless sea, if hope had never been dashed with fear. But, alas! there were moments, even at Peggy's best, when the shadow of earthly doom fell dark across the summer glory of a clime that knows not winter. Sometimes, in the midst of her joyous delight in the things around her, a sudden paroxysm of coughing would surprise the poor child, shaking and rending her as if some invisible demon had seized the wasted form by the narrow shoulders, and were trying to tear it piecemeal.

"My enemy has been very cruel to me to-day," Peggy would say afterwards, with a serio-comic smile. "I thought Dr. Bright would get the better of him."

At first she used to call that wearing cough her enemy, as she had heard old people talk of their gout or their rheumatism. Later, she talked of her cough as the dragon, and of Dr. Bright as St. George; but although the medical champion

might get the better of the dragon now and again, he was a sturdy monster, and harder to kill than the toughest crocodile along the sandy shores of old Nile. Peggy was wonderfully patient, wonderfully hopeful about herself, even when hope began to wax faint and dim in the hearts of her companions, when the trained attendant could tell of sleepless and sorely-troubled nights, and when Eve, creeping in from her adjoining bedchamber half a dozen times between night and morning, was saddened at finding the fevered head tossing unquietly upon the heaped-up pillows, the blue eyes wide open, and the parched lips uttering speech that told of semi-delirium.

However bad Peggie's nights were, her days were generally cheerful. She was never tired of the hillside walks, the luxury of ferns, and palms, and aloes, the glory of the golden-tufted mimosas, the peach blossom, the anemones, the silvery threads of water creeping down the rocky gorges, such narrow streamlets, cleaving Titanic rocks. To Peggy these things brought no satiety; while the more earthly and sensual enjoyment of afternoon tea at Rumpelmeyer's, sitting out of doors, and eating as many cakes

and bon-bons as ever she liked, was only a lesser revelation of a world where all was beauty. Eve and her husband saw the crowds at Rumpelmeyer's with an amused interest. They looked on at this curiously blended smart world, this olla-podrida of Royal Duchesses and Liverpool merchants, millionaires and impecunious *cavalière servente*, Parisian celebrities, the old nobility of France and England—old as the Angevin kings, when England and France were one monarchy—and the newly gotten wealth of New York and Chicago. Eve and Vansittart looked on and were amused, and then drove back to the villa on the hill, and rejoiced in the seclusion of their own garden, which it had been their delight to improve and beautify. Everything grew so quickly—the rose-trees they planted thrived so well that it was like gardening in fairyland.

They were not intruded upon by that smart world which they saw at the tea-shop on the Croisette. At Cannes two things only count as worthy of regard or reverence—the first, fashion; the second, money. Eve and her husband had neither one nor the other. A Hampshire squire, with three thousand a year and a young wife,

was a person who could interest nobody. Had he been a bachelor and a dancing man, he would have been eligible and even courted; for dancing men are in a minority, and a ball at the Cercle Nautique is apt to recall Edwin Long's famous picture of the Babylonian Marriage Market, women of all nationalities waiting to be asked to dance. A married man, a Hampshire squire, living quietly with his wife and her sister in one of the cheapest villas in Californie was a person to seek, and not to be sought. If the Vansittarts wanted to be in society they should have brought letters of introduction, observed a Plutocrat whose garden joined the Vansittarts' modest enclosure. "We can't be expected to take any interest in people of whom we know absolutely nothing."

It would have been difficult, if not impossible, for the leaders of Cannes society, the owners of palatial villas, and givers of luncheons and dances, to believe or understand that these pariahs did not desire to enter within the charmed circle where wealth was the chief qualification, and where the triple millionaire, however humble his origin, and however dubious the source of

his gold, was sure of admission and approval. Granted that such millionaires were talked of lightly as "good fun." The smart people who laughed were pleased to eat their luncheons, and dance at their balls, or drive on their coaches, or sail in their yachts. For the smart world of Californie and La Route de Frejus February meant a continual round of luncheons and teas, dinners and dances. Everybody complained of the "strain," of being "dragged" from party to party, of having "so much to do;" these butterflies treating the futilities of life as if they were serious labour. To these the tranquil happiness of such a couple as Eve and Vansittart was unthinkable. Of course the poor things would be in society if society would have them. Cannes must be very dreary for such as they. It was really a pity that this kind of people did not stop short at St. Raphael or go on to Alassio.

While society—looking at the "pretty young woman with the rather handsome husband" from afar, through a tortoiseshell *merveilleuse*—compassionated their forlorn condition, Eve and Vansittart found the resources of the neighbourhood inexhaustible, had schemes and delights for every

day, and Peggy was never tired of comparing the Maritime Alps to heaven. What less in loveliness than heaven could be a land where one could picnic in February? For Peggy's sake there were many picnics—now in a rocky gorge on the road to Vallauris, where one could sit about the dry bed of a cataract, and set out one's luncheon on great rocky boulders, screened by feathery palm trees that suggested the South Sea Islands; now on the hilltop at Mougins, with the great white hotel, and the pinnacled walls of Grasse looking at them, across the deep valley of flower fields and mulberry orchards, blossoming lilies and budding vines; and now, with even more delight, in some sheltered inlet on the level shore of St. Honorat, some tiny cove where the water was clear and exquisite in colouring as ever dreamer imagined that jasper sea of the Apocalypse. Sometimes they landed and took their picnic luncheon under the pine trees, or on the edge of the sea—Peggy keenly interested in everything she saw, the time-worn fortress-monastery that rose tall above the level shore, and the modern building with its low-roofed cells and modest chapel, a building whose monastic

rule forbade the entrance of Peggy and all her sex, and which therefore inspired the liveliest curiosity on her part. Not less delightful was the sister island of St. Marguerite, with its thrilling mystery of the nameless prisoner, whom Peggy would have to be none other than a twin brother of the great Louis, and whose faded red velvet chair she looked at with affection and awe.

"To think of his meekly worshipping in this chapel, with an iron mask upon his face, when he might have been reigning over France and making war all over Europe, like the great King."

"But in that case Louis must have been here. You wouldn't have a brace of monarchs, Peggy. One brother must have gone to the wall," argued Vansittart.

"They needn't have shut him up in a dungeon, and made him wear a mask," said Peggy.

"True, Peggy; the whole story involves a want of common sense which makes it incredible. I no more believe in a twin brother of Louis Quatorze than in a twin brother of our Prince of Wales, languishing in the Tower of London at this present moment."

"But you believe there was a masked prisoner," exclaimed Peggy, with keen anxiety.

"Oh, yes, I am willing to believe in the Italian exile. The record of that gentleman's existence seems tolerably reliable, and a very bad time he had of it. They managed things wonderfully well in those days. A political agitator, or the writer of an unpleasant epigram, could be promptly suppressed. They had prison walls for inconvenient people of all kinds."

Peggy sighed. She did not care about the Italian politician. She had read her Dumas, and had a settled belief in the royal twin. She liked to think that he had lived and suffered in that cold grey fortress. She cared nothing for Marshal Bazaine, and his legendary leap from the parapet, which the soldier guide recited with his tongue in his cheek. She despised Vansittart for being so curious about an event which was utterly without romance—an elderly general creeping out of captivity under the nose of guardians who were wilfully blind, and going comfortably away in a steamer.

Those tranquil days on the islands or on the sea would have been as exquisite for Eve as for

Peggy if the heart of the elder sister had not been heavy with anxiety about the younger. During the first few weeks in that soft climate Peggy's chance had seemed almost a certainty of cure. Even Dr. Bright had been hopeful for those first weeks, surprised into hopefulness by the marked improvement in his patient; but of late he had been grave to despondency, and every consultation strengthened Eve's fears.

Indeed, there was little need of medical science to reveal the cruel truth. Every week that went by left something of Peggy's youth and strength behind it. The walks which were easy for her in February were difficult in March, and impossible in April. The ground that was lost was never regained. Eve looked back, and remembered how Peggy had walked to the Signal with her a fortnight after their arrival. They had walked very slowly, and they had sat down to rest several times in the course of the journey; but the ascent had been accomplished without pain, and Peggy had been wild with delight at the prospect which rewarded them at the top.

"We'll come up here often, won't we, Eve?"

"As often as you like, darling."

The second ascent was made in March, when the peach trees and anemones were all in bloom, and the gold of the mimosas was a glory of the past. This time Peggy found the winding walks long and wearisome, and although, in spite of Eve's entreaties, she persisted in reaching the summit, the journey had evidently been too much for her. She sank exhausted on a bench, and it was nearly an hour before she was rested enough to mount the little platform on which the telescope stood, and explore the distance, looking for the French squadron which was rounding the point of the Esterelles, on its way to Toulon. Poor little Peggy! She was the only person who did not believe in the seriousness of her case.

"You and Dr. Bright make too much fuss about me," she said to Eve, seeing tears in the fond sister's eyes. "I am only growing. See how short my frock is! I have grown inches since Christmas."

She stretched out her thin legs—so thin as to make the feet look abnormally big, and contemplated the spectacle with a satisfied air.

"I am going to be very tall," she said. "I have only outgrown my strength. That is all

that is the matter with me. Sophy and Jenny always said as much. And as for the cough which seems to frighten you so, it's only a stomach cough. Sophy said so."

Vansittart had procured every contrivance which could make Peggy's life easier. He bought her a donkey, on whose back she could be carried up to the Signal, and when her own back grew too weak to endure the fatigue of sitting on the donkey he bought her a wheel chair, which a patient Provençal two-legged beast of burden was willing to drag about all day, if Peggy pleased. And at each stage of her weakness—at each step on the downward road—he found some contrivance to make locomotion easier, so that Peggy might live out of doors, in the sunshine and on the sea.

Alas! there came a day when Peggy no longer cared to be carried about, when even the ripening loveliness of the land, the warmth and splendour of the southern spring, the white-sailed skiff with its quaint old sailors talking their unintelligible Cannois, and chivalrously attentive to Peggy's lightest wish—the time came when even these things could not tempt her from the

invalid couch in the garden, where she lay and watched the opening orange blossoms, and wondered who would be there to mark the first change from green to gold in the turn of the year, or thought of Eve's wedding and the orange wreath in her hair, and marvelled to remember how strong her young limbs felt in that gladdest of midsummers, and how slight a thing it had been to walk to the Roman village upon Bexley Hill, or to the pine-crowned crest of Blackdown. And now Vansittart had to carry her to the sofa in the orange grove, and she lay there supine all through the golden afternoon, while Eve, who was said to be herself in delicate health, sat in a low chair near her, and read aloud from Dumas' historical novels, or some fairy tale.

But this increasing weakness of hers was of no consequence, Peggy protested, when she saw Eve looking anxious about her. She had only outgrown her strength. When she had done growing she would be as strong as ever, and able to climb those Sussex hills just as well as ever. But she would not be here to see the flower change to the fruit. That miracle of Nature's handicraft would be for other eyes—for the eyes of some

other weakling, perhaps, passing, like Peggy, through the ordeal of overgrowth. But there was something far more wonderful than tree or flower, which had been whispered about by Peggy's nurse. There was the hope of a baby nephew or a baby niece in the first month of summer, a baby that was to open its eyes on some cool Alpine valley, to which Mr. and Mrs. Vansittart and their charge would migrate, when the plane trees by the harbour had unfolded their broad leaves, and the sun that looked upon Cannes was too fierce for any but the hardy natives of the old fishing village. In that sweet summer time a baby was to appear among them, and take its place in all their hearts and on all their knees, and was to reign over them by the divine right of the firstborn. Peggy's nurse told her that, were it only for the sake of this new-comer, she ought to take care of herself, and get well quickly.

"You wouldn't like not to see the baby, would you, Miss Margaret?"

Peggy always felt inclined to laugh when her prim attendant called her Miss Margaret. She had never been addressed by her baptismal name

by any one else; but Benson was a superior person, who had lived only in the best families, and who did everything in a superior way.

“Like not to see Eve’s baby? Why, of course I shall see it—see it and nurse it, every day of my life,” answered Peggy.

“Of course, miss, if you are well enough when June comes.”

“If—I—am—well—enough,” Peggy repeated slowly, turning towards the nurse with an earnest gaze. “Perhaps you mean that I may not live till June. I heard you say something about me to the housemaid yesterday morning when she was making your bed. I was only half asleep; though I was too drowsy to speak and let you know I could hear all you were saying. You are quite wrong—both of you. I have only outgrown my strength. I shall grow up into a strong young woman, and I shall be very fond of Eve’s baby. I shall be the first aunt he will know.”

She stopped to laugh—a hoarse little laugh, which it pained Benson to hear.

“Isn’t that absurd?” she asked. “I am calling the baby ‘he.’ But I do hope it will be a boy—

I adore little boys—and I'm afraid I rather hate little girls."

"A son and heir," said the nurse, placidly. "That will look nice in the newspapers."

"Yes, baby will have to be in the newspapers," agreed Peggy. "His first appearance upon any stage. I should so love to make something for him to wear. Eve is always working for him; though she contrives to keep her work a secret, even from me. 'Mothers'-meeting work,' she said, when I asked her what she was so busy about. As if I didn't know better than that! One doesn't use the finest lawn and real Valenciennes for mothers'-meeting work. Let me make something for Eve's baby, Benson, there's a dear. I would take such pains with my stitches."

"It would tire you too much, Miss Margaret."

"No, no, it won't. My legs are weak—not my fingers. Let me make something, and surprise Eve with it when it is finished."

"I don't think Mrs. Vansittart would like you to know, miss. It is a secret."

"Yes, but Eve knows that I know. I told her that I had been dreaming about her, and that I

dreamt there was a baby. It was after I heard you and Paulette whispering—I really did dream—and Eve kissed me, and cried a little, and said perhaps my dream might come true.”

Peggy being very urgent, her nurse brought her some fine flannel, as soft as silk, and cut out a flannel shawl for the unknown, and instructed Peggy as to the manner in which it was to be made, and Peggy was propped up with pillows, and began a floss-silk scallop with neat little stitches, and with an earnest laboriousness which was a touching spectacle; but, alas! after ten minutes of strenuous labour, great beads of perspiration began to roll down Peggy’s flushed face, and the thin arm and hand trembled with the effort.

“Oh, Miss Margaret, you mustn’t work any more,” cried Benson, shocked at her appearance.

“I’m afraid I can’t, Nurse; not any more to-day,” sighed Peggy, sinking back into the pillows, breathless and exhausted. “But I’ll go on with baby’s shawl to-morrow. Please fold it up for me and keep it in your basket. Eve

mustn't see it till it's finished. The stitches are not too long, are they?"

No, the stitches were very small, but crowded one upon another in a manner that indicated resolute effort and failing sight.

"I feel as if I had been making shawls all day, like the poor woman in the poem," said Peggy. "'Stitch, stitch, stitch, with eyelids heavy and dim!' How odd it is that everything seems difficult when one is ill! I thought it was only my legs that were weak, but I'm afraid it's the whole of me. My finger aches with the weight of my thimble—the dear little gold thimble my brother-in-law gave me on Christmas Day."

She put the little thimble to her lips, and kissed it as if it were a sentient thing. Vansittart came into the room while she was so engaged.

"Oh, there you are," she said. "Do you know what I was thinking about?"

"Not I, quotha," said he, sitting down by Peggy's couch and taking her thin little hand in his. "Who can presume to thread the labyrinth of a young lady's mind, without the least

little bit of a clue? You must give me a clue, Peg, if you want me to guess."

"Well, then, I was thinking of you. Is that a clue?"

"Not much of a one, my pet. You might be thinking anything—that my last coat is a bad fit about the shoulders—a true bill, Peggy; that I am growing stupid and indolent in this inconsistent climate, where one sleeps half the day and lies awake more than half the night."

"I was thinking of your goodness to Eve, and to all of us. My gold thimble; your bringing us here when you would rather have stayed in Hampshire to hunt. And I was thinking how different our lives would have been if you had never come to Fernhurst. Eve would just have gone on slaving to make both ends meet, cutting out all our frocks, and working her Wilcox and Gibbs, and bearing with father's temper, and going without things. I should have outgrown my strength all the same; but there would have been no one to bring us to Cannes. I should never have seen the Mediterranean, or the Snow Alps, or mother's grave. I should never have

seen Eve in pretty tea-gowns, with nothing in the world to do except sit about and look lovely. You have changed our lives."

"For better, Peggy?" he asked earnestly.

"Yes, yes; for worlds and worlds better," she answered, with her arms round his neck.

Benson had crept off to her dinner; Peggy and her brother-in-law were alone.

"God bless you for that assurance, Peggy dear. And—if—if I were not by any means a perfect Christian—if I had done wicked things in my life—given way to a wicked temper, and done some great wrong, not in treachery but in passion, to a fellow-man—could you love me all the same, Peggy?"

"Of course I could. Do you suppose I ever thought you quite perfect? You wouldn't be half so nice if you were outrageously good. I know you could never be false or treacherous. And as for getting in a passion, and even hitting people, I shouldn't love you one morsel the less for that. I have often wanted to hit people myself. My own sister Sophy, for instance, when she has been too provoking, with her superior airs and high-flown notions. Kiss me, Jack,

again and again. If you were ever so wicked I think I should love you all the same."

That was Vansittart's last serious talk with Peggy. It was indeed Peggy's last serious talk upon this planet, save for the murmured conversation in the dawn of an April day, when the London vicar, who was doing duty at St. George's, came in before an early celebration to sit beside Peggy's pillow and speak words of comfort and promise, words that told of a fairer world, whither Peggy's footsteps were being guided by an impalpable Hand—a world where it might be she would see the faces of the loved and lost—those angel faces, missed here, to be regained there.

"Do you really believe it, sir?" Peggy asked eagerly, with her thin hand on the grave Churchman's sleeve, her imploring looks perusing the worn, elderly face. "Shall I really see my mother again—see her and know her in heaven?"

"We know only what He has told us, my dear. 'In My Father's house there are many mansions'—and it may be that the homes we have lost—the firesides we remember dimly—the faces that

looked upon our cradles—will be found—again—somewhere.”

“Ah, you are crying,” said Peggy. “You would like to believe—just as I would. That is the only heaven I care for—to be with mother—and for Eve and Jack to come to us by-and-by.”

This day, when the vicar came in the early morning, was thought to be Peggy's last on earth, but she lingered, rallied, and slowly sank again, a gradual fading—painless towards the end; for the stages of suffering which she had borne so patiently were past, and the last hours were peaceful. She could keep her arms round Eve's neck and listen to the soothing voice of sorrowing love, till even this effort was too much, and the weak arms relaxed their hold, and were gently laid upon the bed in that meek attitude which looked like the final repose. She could hear Eve still—speaking or reading to her in the soft, low voice that was like falling waters—but her mind was wandering in a pleasant dream-land, and she thought she was drifting on a streamlet that winds through the valley between

Bexley Hill and Blackdown; through summer pastures where the meadow-sweet grew tall and white beside the water, and where the voices of haymakers were calling to each other across the newly cut grass.

“I should like to have lived to see your child,” were Peggy’s last words, faltered brokenly into Eve’s ear as she knelt beside the bed.

There were long hours of silence; the mute faint struggles of the departing spirit; but that wish was the last of Peggy’s earthly speech.

Eve was broken-hearted. She never knew till the end came how she had clung to some frail thread of hope; in spite of the Destroyer’s palpable advance; in spite of the physician’s sad certainty; in spite of her husband’s gentle warnings, striving to prepare her for the end. The blow was terrible. Vansittart trembled for life and reason when he saw the intensity of her grief. Always highly strung, she was in a condition of health which made hysteria more to be dreaded. The brief delay between death and burial horrified her; yet to Vansittart that swift departure of the lifeless clay seemed an un-

utterable relief. For just a few hours the wasted form lay on the rose-strewn bed; and then in the early dimness, before the mists had floated up from the valley, before harbour and parish church stood out clear and bright in the face of the morning sun, came the bearers of the coffin, and at nine o'clock Vansittart went alone to see the loved youngest sister laid in the cemetery on the hill, in the secluded corner he himself had chosen—near the mother's grave—as a spot where Eve might like to sit by-and-by, when sorrow should be less poignant, a nook from which she could see the shallow bay, and the cloud-capped islands jutting out into the sea, and the tall white lighthouse of Antibes, standing up above the crest of the hill, glorified in the afternoon sun, as if it were nearer heaven than earth.

In everything that Vansittart did at this time his thought was of Eve and her feelings. His grief for her sorrow was no less keen than the sorrow itself. He had been very fond of poor little Peggy, and had grown fonder of her as her weakness increased, and strengthened her claim upon his compassion. But now he saw with Eve's eyes, thought with Eve's mind, and every

sigh and every tear of hers wrung his heart afresh.

Those earnest words of Peggy's, spoken with the wasted arms about his neck, were very precious to him. It seemed as if they were in some wise his absolution for the wrong which he had done in keeping the secret of Harold Marchant's death. Peggy had told him that she and her sister owed comfort and happiness to him—that he had changed the tenor of their lives from struggling penury to luxury and ease. He knew that over and above all these material advantages he had given Harold Marchant's sister a profound and steadfast love—a love which would last as long as his life, and which was and would be the governing principle of his life—and he told himself that in keeping that dark secret he had done well.

Tranquillized by this assurance he put aside the old fear as something to be forgotten. But there was a nearer fear, a fear which had grown out of Peggy's illness and death, which no casuistry could lessen or thrust aside. The fear of hereditary phthisis came upon him in the dead of night, and flung its dark shadow across his path

by day. He had talked long with Dr. Bright after Peggy's death, and the kind physician had calmly discussed the probabilities of evil; had held nothing back. Fear there must needs be, in such a case; but there was also ground for hope. Vansittart told the doctor of Eve's buoyant spirits and energy, her long walks and untiring pleasure in natural scenery. "That does not look like hereditary disease, does it?" he asked, pleading for a hopeful answer.

"Those are good signs, no doubt. Your wife is of an active temperament, highly nervous, but with a very happy disposition. Her sister's fatal illness has tried her severely; but we must look to the arising of a new interest as the best cure for sorrow."

"Poor Peggy! Yes, we shall brood less upon her loss when we have our little one to think about."

The thought of Eve's coming happiness as a mother was his chief comfort. She could not fail to be consoled by the infant whose tender life would absorb her every thought, whose sleeping and waking would be a source of interest and anxiety. But before the consoler's coming there

was a dreary interval of weeks to be bridged over, and this was a cause of fear.

There was a journey to be taken, for the climate of Cannes would be too hot for health, or even for endurance, before mother and child could be moved. Thus it was imperative that they should move without delay. Indeed, Vansittart thought they could not too soon leave the house and garden so closely associated with the image of the dead—where everything recalled Peggy, and the alternating hopes and fears of those gradual, sad stages on her journey to the grave. On this path her feet had tripped so lightly last February, when her illness was talked of as “only a cough.” Under this giant eucalyptus her couch had been established in April, when walking had become a painful effort, and she could only lie and absorb the beauty of her surroundings, and talk of the coming days in which she would be strong again, and able to go up to the Signal with Jack.

Vansittart fancied that Eve would catch eagerly at the idea of leaving that haunted house; but her grief increased at the thought of going away.

"I like to be here in the place she loved. I can at least console myself with remembering how happy she was with us; and what a joy Californie and the wild walks above Golfe Juan were to her. Sometimes I think she is in the garden still. I lie upon the sofa here and watch the window, expecting to see her come creeping in, leaning upon the stick you gave her—so white and weak and thin—but so bright, so patient, so lovable."

Then came the inevitable burst of tears, with the threatening of hysteria, and it was all her husband could do to tranquillize her.

"The comfort you get here is a cruel comfort, dearest," he said. "We shall both be ever so much better away from Cannes—at St. Martin de Lantosque, in the cool clear mountain air. Our rooms are ready for us, we shall have our own servants, and if the accommodation be somewhat rough——"

"Do you think I mind roughness with you? I could be happy in a hut. Oh, Jack, you are so patient with my grief; there are people who would say I am foolish to grieve so much for a young sister; but it is the first time Death has

touched us since mother went. We were such a happy little band. I never thought that one of us could die, and that one the youngest, the most loving of us all."

"Dearest, I shall never think your grief unreasonable; but I want you to grieve less, for my sake, for the sake of the future. Think, Eve, only think what it will be to have that new tie between us, a child, belonging equally to each, looking equally to each for all it has of safety and of gladness upon this earth."

END OF VOL. II.



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